

Liberative Service: A Comparative Theological Reflection on Dalit Theology's Service and Swami Vivekananda's Seva

Author: Christopher Robert Conway

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Theology

LIBERATIVE SERVICE: A COMPARATIVE THEOLOGICAL
REFLECTION ON DALIT THEOLOGY'S SERVICE

AND

SWAMI VIVEKANANDA'S SEVA

a dissertation

by

CHRISTOPHER ROBERT CONWAY

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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and Swami Vivekananda's Seva

Christopher Robert Conway

Dr. Catherine Cornille

Abstract:

This dissertation offers a comparative theological reflection on Dalit Christian theology—a contextual, liberation theology rooted in the Dalit communities' experiences of caste-based oppression—and Swami Vivekananda—the late 19th c. Neo-Vedantin and founder of the Ramkrishna Math and Mission. It seeks to provide a model of Dalit liberative service that attends to the theology's objectives—identity affirmation and a liberative social vision—works to foster liberative partnerships beyond the Dalit Christian community, and responds to the critical, but constructive assessment of Dalit theology offered by its present generation of theologians. As a work in comparative theology, it does so through a close, reflective reading of Swami Vivekananda, his Practical Vedanta, and his own reworking of *sevā* (devotional service). The intent is not to present Vivekananda as a corrective, but rather to see newly and understand differently the dimensions of liberative service that are made manifest by seeing and understanding how *sevā* performs in Vivekananda's thought and how it there leads to spiritual and social liberation. These dimensions include recovering by uncovering the *imago Dei* in Dalit theology, re-presenting liberative service as representing the Kingdom of God, and service understood as doubly and mutually liberating.

While Chapter Five presents the fruits of this comparative theological reflection on Dalit Christian theology and Swami Vivekananda, the preceding four chapters provide the necessary foundation for this engagement. The first and second chapters address the

historical and theological development of Dalit Christian theology presenting its origins in the Modern Maharashtran Dalit Movement and the Indian Christian context, respectively. The third and fourth examine Vivekananda's development of Practical Vedanta and sevā. Together they provide the content from which and through which this comparative theological reflection occurs.

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Introduction

Dalit Theology: Then and Now

In the early 1980's a new theology began to arise out of the conference rooms in Indian seminaries across the subcontinent. Realizing that the traditional tract of Indian Christian theology did speak to, about, or from the church's majority members, these theologians charted a different course for Indian theology. Soon thereafter named Dalit theology, this mode of theological inquiry grounded itself in the experiences of the Dalit community. The Dalits, formerly identified as untouchables and outcastes, suffer under caste oppression and economic exploitation and encounter violence and persecution in their daily struggle to survive. Dalit theology presents itself as a prophetic and pathetic response to this lived reality.¹ In claiming the name 'Dalit,' it tapped into a broader movement already existing in Maharashtra, and appropriated the movement's emphasis on conscientization and protest. Dalit theology offered for the first time a discipline and system that articulated and reflected upon Dalit peoples and communities' experiences in light of God's saving and liberating word.

Although Dalit theology enjoyed significant, if gradual, success in establishing itself as a recognized, proper, and needed discipline within Indian Christian theology, its first three decades witnessed fewer successes in actualizing or realizing

¹ Pathetic is a technical term in Dalit theology that denotes its foundation in the pathos—suffering—experiences of the Dalit community. For A. P. Nirmal, the 'Father of Dalit theology,' and other first-generation Dalit theologians like M. E. Prabhakar and V. Devasahayam, pathos is the 'Dalitness' of Dalit theology.

Dalit liberation.² Caste oppression, economic exploitation, and the rest persist within society and within the church today. Despite the many dramatic social, political, and economic changes that India has undergone in these past thirty years, Dalit suffering continues relatively unabated. While acknowledging the socialization and institutionalization of oppressive and exploitative caste-ideologies—their reification in and through structures and relationships—the present generation of Dalit theologians has turned its collective, critical eye towards Dalit theology as well. This second-generation whose theology was formed and remains informed by the first, many of whom were its teachers, recognizes the inherent liberative potential within Dalit theology and questions whether its present articulation can actualize that potential. Can Dalit theology grow in order to respond to its 21st c. context, and can Dalit theology change so as to become truly liberative?

Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Peacock, editors and contributors to a recently published volume titled *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, highlight the newness and the sameness that Dalit theology encounters. They state, ‘What joins this new generation of Dalit theologians together with those who articulated Dalit theology earlier is not a commonality of experience, but rather a commonality of commitment to overcome, to root out, and even annihilate the discriminatory caste system.’³ That the experiences have changed, but the problems have

² As will be seen in Chapter 1, I am a bit more positive in my assessment of Dalit theology’s first-generation than many other second-generation Dalit theologians are. The fact that it has become theological perspective that not only cannot be ignored, but also must be reckoned with reveals its impact. However, I do agree with many of their critiques as they concern the practical effects of Dalit theology.

³ Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock, ‘Introduction,’ in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, ed. by Clarke, et al. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11. This raises an important question of how caste is understood within Dalit theology. This may be a rhetorical holdover from B. R. Ambedkar’s call for ‘the annihilation of caste,’ offered famously and argued passionately in a treatise of the same name. It is clear

not has led this present generation to question the ‘practical efficacy’ of Dalit theology as it has developed.⁴ Their responses have been critical, but constructive as Dalit theologians ever look to find new ways for bringing God’s Good News to Dalit persons and for realizing the liberative aspirations of Dalit communities.⁵

The question of practical efficacy entails an examination of Dalit theology’s method and content. Its practical shortcomings—the failure to annihilate casteist ideology, the inability to end Dalit oppression and exploitation—arise partly from within its theological articulation and reflection. Its practical inefficacy, the failure to actualize its liberative potential, results from several interrelated issues concerning identity, practice, and methodology. Is the identity affirmed by Dalit theology—one focused primarily on the pathos of Dalitness rather than in conjunction with its protest—ultimately liberative? Is the practice enjoined by Dalit theology liberative? Is its liberative social vision capable of leading to Dalit liberation by creating Dalit and non-Dalit agents for societal transformation? Is its methodology liberative—does methodological exclusivism ultimately result in theological exclusivism and liberative impotency? The questions raised here echo those asked by second-generation Dalit theologians.

that Dalit theology opposes the oppressive nature of casteist ideology, what Swami Vivekananda calls ‘prejudice and privilege.’ Caste understood to be unequivocally evil, however, owes much to an Orientalist view of the system and ‘Brahmanism,’ which Dalit theology problematically appropriates frequently. For an important examination of caste and an orthodox and Brahmanical Hindu reflection upon it see, Francis X. Clooney, S. J. ‘Finding One’s Place in the Text: A Look at the Theological Treatment of Caste in Traditional India,’ *Journal of Religious Ethics* 17.1 (1989).

⁴ Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 1. Rajkumar defines practical efficacy as Dalit theology’s ability to ‘contribute... towards practical Dalit liberation.’

⁵ The second-generation critique is best presented in Rajkumar’s *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*. His work fits well into the broader reevaluating trend that is occurring within theologies of liberation. See Victor Anderson’s *Beyond Ontological Blackness* and Ivan Petrella’s *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic*. These works provide a new prepositional perspective. Thirty years ago we were moving ‘towards;’ now we are moving ‘beyond.’ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995). Ivan Petrella, *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic* (London: SCM Press, 2008).

For Dalit Christian theology this reflection begins in the recognition that the church is Dalit in its constitution and non-Dalit in its practice—an acknowledgment that is made, but its import often obscured. For Clarke and Peniel Rajkumar, this fact requires a return to the ‘Dalit’ of Dalit theology conceived not as an identity but as a practice. Clarke accomplishes this by recovering non-Christian Dalit religiosity, its symbols and practices, and reflects upon their significance for Dalit theology. It is a return to that which gave meaning for Dalit communities prior to their conversion and still provides meaning for them today. The operative question is not dissimilar to that of A. P. Nirmal and other first-generation theologians: What is Dalit about Dalit Christianity? However, Clarke desires not for Dalit to be interpreted through Christianity, but for Christianity to be interpreted through Dalit.

Rajkumar offers a slightly more nuanced question: What is Dalit-Christian about Dalit Christianity? His response focuses on the Christian meaning-making that occurs within Dalit Christian communities’ practice, calling for Dalit Christian theology and by extension the church to be more representative of this reality. These are necessary questions for intra-religious reflection, and they work to create liberative partnerships amongst Dalit-Christians and non-Dalit Christians within the church. In this dissertation I extend this line of questioning further out in order to explore the interreligious dimensions and implications for liberative partnerships beyond the church. A way to frame the question would be: How is the non-Dalit, non-Christian significant for Dalit Christian theology, and conversely, how is Dalit Christian theology significant for the non-Dalit, non-Christian? These may be rather atypical questions for Dalit theology, but

they are necessary if it is to be a contextual and liberative theology. They are asked to stir up Dalit theology, not to subvert it.

Here, I propose one way for Dalit theology to move forward. This proposal explores the theological import of liberative partnerships, especially interreligious liberative partnerships. While not wanting to diminish partnerships that operate primarily at the social, political, or economic level, I aim to highlight the contribution that theological liberative partnerships can make towards practical Dalit liberation—a contribution that will reverberate through these other levels. To do so, I present Swami Vivekananda, a 19th c. Neo-Vedantin from Bengal, as one such partner. Through a comparative theological engagement between his understanding of Practical Vedanta and sevā (devotional and now social service offered to the poor as God) and Dalit theology, I will demonstrate constructively and apologetically the liberative potential present in such a comparative reflection. The intent is not to copy or superimpose Vivekananda's thinking upon Dalit theology as if it could be made to serve as a corrective tool for fixing Dalit theology. Instead it is to read and reflect, encounter and engage with a Hindu partner whose concerns and questions align well with those of Dalit theology. In understanding how Practical Vedanta and sevā function as critical and reflective theological responses to the material and spiritual poverty Vivekananda witnessed throughout India, Dalit theology can return to itself with a new perspective and new insights into how it too offers such a response.

Why Swami Vivekananda?

A comparative theological approach requires a theological partner (text, person, practice) with whom to reflect. Invariably, this presupposes there to be some kind of resonance between one's home tradition and this new, other partner, even if that initial sense is as developed as a hunch. The depths and significance of this resonance—and with a greater attunement their consonance and dissonance—gradually unfolds through the comparative acts themselves, but the first, initiating act is choosing a partner. My selection of Swami Vivekananda to be the primary partner in this comparative theological reflection is a pragmatic choice made for three main reasons.

First, Vivekananda is Hindu. Dalit theology has viewed Hinduism, especially conceived of as Brahmanism, to be antagonistic to Dalit liberation. Moreover, as Dalit theology sought to differentiate itself from traditional Indian Christian theology it routinely dismissed or rejected interreligious engagement with Hinduism on account of its perceived inability to speak legitimately and liberatively to the Dalit condition.⁶ However, because India is predominantly a Hindu nation, liberative partnerships will need to be formed with Hindus. Vivekananda provides one inroad to thinking about and forming such partnerships.

Second, K. Wilson has identified already the broader reform movement from which Vivekananda emerged to be a potential partner for Dalit theology and communities.⁷ Although such a partnership has yet to be forged, Wilson and others like

⁶ Even the 14th c. outcaste, Maharashtran Bhakti *sant* Chokemela who had been revered by the Mahar community, is now seen as figure who legitimates the status quo rather than one who rejects it. See Eleanor Elliot, 'Chokemela and Eknath: Two *Bhakti* Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change,' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 15.1-2 (1980) and Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner, '*Bhakti* or *Vidroha*: Continuity and Change in Dalit Sahitya,' *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 15.1-2 (1980).

⁷ Wilson states, 'The Dalit Christians should guard themselves against judging Indian society purely on the basis of the decaying fanatic world-views and leaving aside several promising and emerging

K. C. Abraham establish a kind of precedent for such engagement. Because nascent Hinduism has been recognized to espouse a humanizing mission similar to Dalit theology's, it lacks some of the ideological difficulties that potentially could accompany other Hindu traditions or figures—both within the traditions and in Dalit's theologies perception of them.⁸ This likeness helps to facilitate the formation of liberative partnerships, but again more than identifying possible partnerships there needs to be an effort towards actually making them.⁹

Third and finally, Vivekananda and his understandings of Practical Vedanta and *sevā* do in fact fit well with Dalit theology's own liberative efforts. The similarities between them—the challenge to prejudice and privilege, the work for the material, psychological, and spiritual uplift of the poor—strengthens the potential bond between them. However, it is not only their similarities but their differences as well that allow for the comparative reflection to generate new insights. These insights do not result in a reductionistic affirmation of similarity in which differences are then ultimately unimportant. Instead, difference provides a dynamic and creative opportunity through which learning and growth can occur. In encountering Vivekananda and thinking with his Practical Vedanta and *sevā*, aspects of Dalit theology may be challenged, rethought,

forces. It is time that the Dalit as well as the non-Dalit, authentic Christians, nascent Hindus, reformed Muslims, and the humanistic forces from various other Faiths and ideologies get united on a human platform and hasten the process of establishing a humane culture.' K. Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture,' in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. A. P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul, 1991), 168.

⁸ Keith Hebden has attempted to recover Mohandas Gandhi as a potential partner for Dalit theology by focusing on Gandhi's anarchism as model for Dalit Christians to counter Hindu Nationalism. Gandhi's relationship with the Modern Dalit Movement is a tense one. On account of his disagreement with B. R. Ambedkar concerning separate Dalit electorates and his use of the term '*harijan*,' which the movement saw as either pejorative (*harijan* can be a euphemism for bastard) or Brahminic (children of Hari, Krishna, who for Dalits can be seen as an oppressing deity), he is not viewed often as a Dalit ally. See Keith Hebden, *Dalit Theology and Christian Anarchism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

⁹ One Indian theologian I spoke with about this project said that perhaps Vivekananda was too easy of a partner. While acknowledging that he is certainly easier than others, I did not find him exceptionally easy or without his own difficulties.

and/or affirmed. Comparative theology challenges any accidental or purposeful theological reification by encouraging a reflection that takes seriously the theological reflection that occurs within another religious tradition. Practical Vedanta and sevā understood in this way allow Vivekananda to become a theological partner in reflection rather than a theological instrument for correction.

Swami Vivekananda, Dalit Theology and Comparative Theology

For the above reasons the selection of Vivekananda may appear easy or at least obvious. However, although many of my initial hypotheses proved correct regarding the potential fruitfulness in a comparative theological reflection between Dalit theology and Swami Vivekananda—in their infancy they were, after all, rather broad—the act of doing comparative theology continually fine-tuned the questions and generated new insights. Having selected Swami Vivekananda as the partner in reflection with Dalit theology, I also begin with a problem to help focus this reflection: caste oppression and economic exploitation as experienced by Dalit communities. Klaus von Stosch highlights the importance for comparative theology to be problem-oriented. He states:

Although comparative theology unites and contrasts, the selection of cases is not arbitrary. It must instead be geared to anthropological and theological problems. And it must engage questions about sense, salvation and truth, as well as critical challenges...through concrete research, one should identify shared problems as both belonging to—and perhaps existing beyond—a certain cultural context...On the one hand, the aim should be to struggle with the main challenges of theology as a whole through comparative theology. On the other hand, work should be carried out on current social problems, as well as religious conflicts—including the potential of violence between religions.¹⁰

¹⁰ Klaus von Stosch, 'Comparative Theology as Liberal and Confessional Theology,' *Religions* 3 (2012): 987-8. Within the second-generation of 'new' comparative theology, theologians like Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier have recognized the possible contributions that liberation theologies can have upon comparative theology especially by highlighting questions of social justice and marginalization. Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier, 'Comparative Theology as a Theology of Liberation,' in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation*, ed. by Francis X. Clooney, S. J. (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

In light of this problem—one recognized, but understood differently by Dalit theology and Vivekananda (this being also a point for comparative reflection)—the method I employ follows closely that of Francis X. Clooney, S. J. Clooney defines comparative theology as:

Comparative Theology—*comparative* and *theological* beginning to end—marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home traditions...*Comparative* in this context marks a practice that requires intuitive as well as rational insight, practical as well as theoretical engagement...as a theological and necessarily spiritual practice (and, in my use of it, a way of reading), *comparison* is a reflective and contemplative endeavor by which we see the other in light of our own, and our own in light of the other. It ordinarily starts with the intuition of an intriguing resemblance that prompts us to place two realities—texts, images, practices, doctrines, persons—near one another, so that they may be seen over and over again, side by side.¹¹

This project began with an ‘intuition of intriguing resemblance’ between Dalit theology and Swami Vivekananda. Both offer responses to the problems of caste and poverty in India, and do so in a way that recognizes the practical and social dimensions of their theological outlook. It was the important, if somewhat basic, impetus for this undertaking. As the back-and-forth reading and reflection dove beneath the superficial, I gained greater insight into not only ‘the what’ of Dalit theology and Swami Vivekananda—the presented, polished, final product of each—but also ‘the how’—the operative methodology that shapes their theology—and ‘the why’—their respective contexts and the questions these raise that their theology feels compelled to address. The final chapter re-presents this dialectic at its tail end as it relates to Dalit theology’s liberative service and Vivekananda’s *sevā*.

¹¹ Francis X. Clooney, S. J., *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 9-10

Swami Vivekananda, Dalit Theology, and I

Both comparative theology and Dalit theology's methodologies draw important attention to my own social and theological location within this project. Comparative theology requires a rootedness within a home-tradition, which provides a point of departure and return in these comparative theological ventures. In the broadest boundaries of this project, I am quite at home: a Christian reflecting upon Hinduism. As the project's particularity becomes more apparent and necessary, my 'at-homeness' becomes a bit more 'un-at-home.' This dis/location has implications not only for the comparative side of this project, but for the Dalit side as well. The first generation of Dalit theologians advocated for a strict methodological exclusivism that sought to protect the nascent theology from cooption. As this dissertation seeks not only to comment upon, but also to contribute to Dalit theology, my non-Dalitness needs to be acknowledged, if not also reconciled with its methodological strictures. I will address this concern first before returning to comparative theology.

In the last decade there has been developing gradually a shift in Dalit theology away from a strict methodological exclusivism and towards a greater theological inclusivism. Sathianathan Clarke states, 'the intention of invoking theological inclusiveness of Dalit theology is to allow for Christian communitarian interrelatedness in the task of overcoming suffering for Dalits.'¹² While the invocation for inclusivism

¹² Clarke, 'Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition,' in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 22. Manchala states, 'A Dalit is one who is opposed to the very logic and ideology of human division on the basis of caste. While proposing Dalit identity as a liberating identity, it is perhaps appropriate to consider expanding the meaning of Dalit to include all those who oppose, reject, and strive to eradicate caste. Their accents on social visions are helpful not only to strengthen and find partnerships but also to be a ferment of change in contexts where social hegemonies overwhelm commonsense.' Manchala, 'Expanding the Ambit,' in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 52. Rajkumar states, 'This

arises from within the Dalit Christian community, the desire to participate in Dalit theological reflection comes from outside of it. Since my first encounter with Dalit theology almost decade ago and then later my encounter with Dalit suffering, I have been moved and challenged to participate. During the end of my time in seminary and throughout my doctoral coursework, I found myself returning again and again to Dalit theology, challenged and animated by the questions it asks and the context from which it speaks. Dalit theology's call for greater inclusivism provides an opening for non-Dalit, but Dalit sympathetic, theologians to engage in Dalit theology, albeit in a necessarily qualified way. This said, with any theological endeavor the desire to pursue it cannot be merely intellectual—what Swami Vivekananda would call ‘mental gymnastics’—but must come also from the heart.

This willingness to participate should also be accompanied by a willingness to accept the ground rules for participation. Most importantly as Clarke states there is the need to ‘recognize their [my, our] respective distance and respectful relatedness to the distinctiveness of Dalit pain-pathos.’¹³ This is more than a reasonable request; it is a practical demand. Here there is a critical awareness that distance from Dalit pathos can be problematic as Dalit pathos provides the foundation for Dalit theological reflection and as Dalit theology is first and foremost at the liberative service of Dalit persons and communities. However, there is also a recognition that distance in solidarity provides a vantage point not necessarily available to those who are more immediate to Dalit pathos.

interrelationality, in fact, allows for means of both evading the duplication of binary categories of the past as well as constructing new anti-monolithic models of exchange which promote new and affirmative versions of existence. This demands a new approach aimed at exploring interrelationality as a possible methodological premise for Dalit theology. Proceeding from pragmatic viability of interrelationality as an agenda-setting exercise by Dalits there are several challenges, first of which is the need to ask ourselves whether Dalit theology is on the threshold of a post-Nirmal, post-exclusive model of theologizing?’

Rajkumar, ‘The Diversity of Dialectics of Dalit Dissent,’ in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 70.

¹³ Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretative Theological Exposition, 22.’

It is not a better view or a God's eye view, but it is a different one, which is able to provide a different perspective that may yield new insights for Dalit theological reflection.

Concerning the methodological question raised by comparative theology—my location within the home tradition—Dalit theology's increased inclusivism helps resolve some of the tension. I have engaged this comparative reflection as someone who is located within Dalit theology, sympathetically or otherwise qualified, but nevertheless there. Even as I locate myself within Dalit theology as I take a step back or step towards 'home'—my North American context—the insights born from the project also inform me and my work here.¹⁴ While one could perhaps ignore the ways in which a previous reflection pops up into one's present reading and reflecting, there is no undoing it. New points of 'intriguing resemblance' emerge that can be pursued or not, but they nevertheless require some response. More than being informed by Swami Vivekananda and Dalit theology, I have been transformed. One could call this seeing differently God in all things, or maybe even seeing non-differently. Methodologically, I have become more aware of place and person in the reflection—something that I had acknowledged without ever truly realizing. Theologically, I have encountered prejudices and presuppositions that would have remained hidden and whose import—beneficial or detrimental—unexplored. Personally, spiritually, ethically, all these various dimensions of how I relate

¹⁴ Perhaps most immediate are those issues analogous to the Dalit condition that pertain to questions of justice, poverty, and solidarity in our own non-Dalit contexts. Similarly, the aesthetical dimensions of Dalit theology, including the incorporation of poetry and art, and the reflection upon traditional, indigenous Dalit religiosity provide methods for thinking theologically about resources not typically considered or even recognized. Dalit theologians have much to say that could be of benefit to theological reflection occurring beyond their context, and likewise we outside the Dalit context can learn much from them.

to myself, God, and neighbor nearby or on the other side of the world, have been impacted.

Conclusion: The Road Ahead

While Chapter 5 presents the fruits of this comparative theological reflection on Dalit theology and Swami Vivekananda, the preceding four chapters provide the necessary foundation for this engagement. The first and second chapters address the historical and theological development of Dalit theology. The third and fourth examine Vivekananda's development of Practical Vedanta and *sevā*, respectively. Together they provide the content from which and through which this reflection occurs. Although they are organized in this way so as to build towards the concluding chapter, the material present within may invite the reader to perform her or his own comparative reflection generating new insights beyond the framing scope of this dissertation. I hope this may be case.

Chapter One outlines the origins of Dalit theology and presents two pivotal moments that led to its creation. The first was the realization that Indian Christian theology required a mode of inquiry that could not only address poverty—economic exploitation—but one also capable of confronting and overcoming caste oppression and stigmatization. The second was its discovery of the Modern Maharashtran Dalit Movement. Through this encounter Dalit theology became 'Dalit.' The chapter further examines the movement's historical, political, and aesthetical development over four

stages and 125 years: Jotiba Phule, B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit Sahitya, and the Dalit panthers. Dalit theology draws special inspiration from Ambedkar and Dalit Sahitya, but until now there has been no survey on the broader movement and its relationship to Dalit theology. The intent here is to trace out and articulate the origins of Dalit theology's 'Dalit,' and identify its impact, positively and problematically, upon Dalit theology.

Chapter Two locates Dalit theology's place within Indian Christianity's historical, cultural, and theological context. As Dalit theology understands itself to be a corrective to and distancing from 'traditional' modes of Indian Christian theological reflection, this chapter first presents the demographic shift that occurred in the Indian church following the mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity in the latter half of the 19th century. It then introduces two influential figures, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay and A. J. Appasamy, whose work represents and guides Indian Christian theology's work to inculturate the tradition into its Indian and Hindu context. Next it lays out Dalit Christian theology's theological development during its first generation in which the efforts to ground reflection in the pathos experiences of Dalit communities and the articulation of Dalit identity directed its trajectory. The chapter concludes by problematizing pathos' central place in Dalit theology and the Biblical paradigms that accompany it—the Deuteronomic Creed and the Suffering Servant—and by outlining briefly the questions to be pursued in the comparative section (Chapter Five).

Chapter Three introduces Swami Vivekananda and his development of Practical Vedanta. It begins with an intellectual biography that highlights many of the diverse influences that contributed to the creation of his Vedānta. The chapter draws out the practical dimensions of his thinking: bringing and making accessible Vedanta to India

and the world and highlighting its ethical nature. It also presents Vivekananda's Vedānta as a synthetic Vedanta, which while recognizing the veracity of all the Vedānta schools establishes Advaita as the tradition's pinnacle. The chapter concludes by drawing out the distinctions and similarities between his understanding of Vedānta and Śaṅkara's. The two predominant assessments are that Vivekananda represents either a complete continuity or radical discontinuity with Śaṅkara. The concluding section of the chapter argues the middle way, drawing attention to where Vivekananda agrees and disagrees with him. The chapter's aim is to establish the philosophical and theological underpinnings upon which he grounded the practice of sevā. By highlighting points of convergence and divergence with Śaṅkara, one can see the strategic decisions Vivekananda makes in creating and presenting Practical Vedanta.

Chapter Four presents Vivekananda's teaching on sevā. It begins by tracing and evaluating the many influences within India and abroad that contributed to sevā's formation. Addressing again a question of continuity, it surveys Sri Ramakrishna's own statements on service and concludes that Vivekananda's teaching on sevā is best understood as an innovation that has its foundation in Ramakrishna's instructions. Next, it examines Vivekananda's letters written to various community members during a six-month stretch between 1893-94 in which his program of social-uplift shifted from compassion for the poor to service to the poor. As sevā presents a reworking of traditional devotional service, this chapter explores also the function sevā's function in Hinduism and particularly Vaiṣṇavism with which Vivekananda is reflecting. It concludes with how sevā can be understood as a practice, *sādhana*, grounded in Practical Vedanta that has social and spiritual import.

Prior to the comparative turn, Chapter Five begins by addressing some of potential obstacles within Dalit theology that would make a comparative theological reflection with Swami Vivekananda difficult. These include an essentialized understanding of Dalitness that necessitates also an essentialized understanding of Brahmanism and methodological exclusivism. The comparative section focuses especially on *sevā* and constructs an understanding of liberative service in light of it and Dalit theology's praxiological framework—the dialectic between the objectives (identity affirmation and liberative social vision) and the approaches (liberative partnerships) of Dalit theology. While avoiding *sevā*'s superimposition upon liberative service, the latter is constructed through an engagement with the former in which the insights gained from understanding *sevā* contribute directly to service's shaping. Through the 'lens' of Swami Vivekananda, concepts like the *imago Dei*, *diakonia*, and the kingdom of God are recovered and rethought with respect to Dalit theology and its praxiological framework. It is to see these traditional teachings with new eyes, and with these new eyes to see their liberative potential for Dalit theology.

Chapter One

In The Beginning: The Origins of Dalit Theology and the ‘Dalit’ of Dalit of Theology

Introduction

This chapter will examine the emergence of Dalit Christian theology in India during the early 1980's. It begins by presenting the theological context in the few years before Dalit theology's emergence that was marked by an awakening to the significance and implications of liberation and contextual theologies. While these theologies provided a catalyst for a theological inquiry grounded in the experiences of India's poorest, Dalit theology sprung from the recognition that the Indian context could not be understood simply through economics—the problem of caste oppression and stigmatization need to be addressed as well. This section concludes with historical survey of those first years of Dalit theology.

The second half of this chapter presents Dalit theology's subsequent awakening to a broader, century-old social, religious, and cultural movement that arose out of Maharashtra. It is from the modern Maharashtran Dalit Movement that Dalit theology discovered its 'Dalitness.' While Dalit theology acknowledges its indebtedness to this movement, the particularities of that debt have yet to be explored directly in relation to the development of both Dalit theology and the movement. The chapter will trace its shaping through two key figures and two organizations: Jotiba Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit *Sahitya*, and the Dalit Panthers. Here it focuses on identifying important elements within the movement both as they developed and as they will influence Dalit theology. Some of these are positive—identity affirmation, conscientization; others are

more problematic—an essentialized understanding of ‘Hinduism’ and, in particular ‘Brahmanism’ to which the Maharashtra Dalit Movement challenges through the development of a counter ideology. The chapter concludes briefly by highlighting Dalit theology’s appropriation of these elements.

Towards the Beginning of ‘a’ Theology

The irruption of liberation and contextual theologies over the past fifty years present two interesting questions in tracing the origins and genealogies of these new theological movements: from whom and from what?¹ The ‘from what’ may be the easier of the two to answer. Each of these theologies rises up and out of a particular context—geographic, economic, social, political, intellectual, confessional—and each is a reflection upon that context in light of faith and practice. In these theologies’ methodology the ‘from what’ is front and center in the theology as it is the acknowledged starting point. The ‘from whom’—whether it be an individual, a collection of likeminded compatriots, or a broader social or political movement—is a bit more difficult to locate. When does a theological movement become a theology?² When do conversations and organizations blossom into or give way to theological positions and propositions? When is ‘a’ theology born?³

¹ This list is by no means exhaustive, but helps to give a sense of the number and diversity of the many kinds of liberation and contextual theologies: Latin American liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, womanist theology, mujerista theology, latin@ theology, Native American liberation theology, African theology, Asian liberation theology, minjung theology, Water Buffalo theology, Dalit theology, Adivasi/Tribal theology, Asian women’s theology, Aboriginal theology, and Indigenous theology.

² Further complicating matters is a trend in theological writing that seeks to maintain the dialectical tension between the already and the not yet by making use of the preposition ‘towards.’ Such a nuanced position suggests that either a critical mass of theologians must be achieved or a more systematic development is required before ‘Towards an X theology’ can become ‘X Theology.’ Nevertheless, ‘towards’ provides a nice signpost for where a theology begins.

³ The use of the indefinite article ‘a’ is not without its problems and is indicative of the post-modern theological landscape of the mid to late 20th century. While offering necessary and vital theological reflection on the particular and the immediate, the hyphenated and identity theologies growing

To reduce the processes of a theology's emergence to a single event or text would seem to be an oversimplification. However, when surveying the theological field of the 20th century, one can locate a time before Latin American liberation theology or a time before Black theology just as one is able to note a time after their arrival. Although there may be no definitive means to mark the birth of each or an easy way to gauge the duration of their gestation, the origins of a good majority of these theologies can be centered upon a paradigmatic text, which at the very least serves as a signpost for those outside the movement that here, now is something new. For those within the movement it functions as the text to which one responds—building upon and/or critiquing it.⁴

The importance of this identification is, as these theologies and modern hermeneutics correctly demonstrate, the importance of knowing context—here no longer limited to the theological movement, but including also the theologian. The context of the theologian who authors such a paradigmatic work, more so if the tradition openly acknowledges him or her as the 'father' or 'mother' of that theology, ultimately gives shape to the trajectory of the theology itself. Especially in the first generation, much of what will be said and much of what will not be said is dependent upon this text and this author.⁵ To understand the method, content, and end of a particular theology one needs

out of liberation and contextual theologies have begun to place great stress on the understanding of the Church as universal, global, transnational, catholic. The tension between the micro and macro identity as in 'Black-Christian theology' or 'Dalit-Christian theology' is held in the hyphen which when maintained should allow a space for dialogue, exchange, inspiration, and critique, but when severed can lead to hostility, reification of the other's identity, paternalism from the macro, and schism from the micro. For an examination of hyphenated theology in the Dalit-Christian and Indian-Christian context and the tension between micro and macro identity see, Sebastian, J. Jayakiran, 'Pressure on the Hyphen: Aspects of the Search for Identity Today in Indian-Christian Theology,' *Religion & Society* 44.4 (1997).

⁴ Such paradigmatic texts include James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (black theology), Mary Daly's *The Church and Second Sex* (feminist theology), and Gustavo Gutiérrez's *A Theology of Liberation* (Latin American liberation theology).

⁵ Dependence resulting either from the novelty of the work—something never before said—or from its aggregation of existing ideas—things said before, but for the first time compiled and systematized for a larger community.

also to understand its starting place—epistemological and contextual, but also temporal and personal.

From Whence Dalit Theology: The History of the Beginning

In October 1978 a seminar was convened at Divine World Seminary in Pune to address the topic of ‘Theologizing in India.’⁶ Many of the papers presented at the seminar raised questions concerning the contextuality of Indian theology, the means for its inculturation, and all highlighted the uniqueness of theologizing in India, calling for theology in India to be formulated in authentically Indian ways. Recurrent throughout these essays is the argument that the wholesale appropriation of Western theology and Western theological methodology is no longer a tenable practice if Indian Christian theology desires to be a living, Indian theology.⁷ A second common position shared by many of the authors is the need for Indian Christian theology to address the problems of poverty and injustice in India. Here Latin American Liberation theology is referenced frequently, but again with the addendum that the Indian context requires the development of an Indian Theology of

⁶ The seminar reflected on this topic from six angles: ‘1. Critique of theologizing in India. 2. What methods do we follow for dogmatic theology? 3. Methods in reading and understanding scripture. 4. Challenge of religious pluralism in India. 5. Challenge of the secular quest of man in India and the insights of the behavioral sciences in Theologizing in India. 6. Suggested models for Theologizing in India.’ Peter Fernando, ‘Introduction,’ in *Theologizing in India*, ed. M. Amaladoss et.al. (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1978), 8. Examining the essays from a historical perspective, this collection offers a wonderful and important glimpse into the larger changes occurring within Indian theology’s self-understanding as it wrestles with its own identity. Alongside essays that are becoming more ‘Indian’ and ‘little tradition’ in their focus are reflections on *Advaita* and Bernard Lonergan.

⁷ Commenting on the disconnect between an a-contextual appropriation of Western theology and the Indian context, Michael Amaladoss writes, ‘It would not be an exaggeration to say that much of the present theologizing in India could be done anywhere in the world, even when the problems which provoke reflections are specifically Indian ones,’ and later ‘We are more aware of the secular world of Harvey Cox than of the caste and corruption in Indian society.’ Addressing the predicament of the Indian theologian he writes, ‘most of our theologians in India are in a very unenviable position. We do our work largely in English. Our source-books are in various European languages. Still we cannot claim to have become identified with the European world-view. We are not fully identified with our own culture either.’ M. Amaladoss, ‘Towards an Indian Theology: Some Methodological Observations,’ *ibid.*, 44, 55, 48.

liberation. However, amongst the theologians presenting at the conference, Michael Amaladoss, S.J. is the only one to make direct reference to the problem of caste. Others like Felix Wilfred and Peter Fernando make oblique references to it, but never overtly identify the problem using that word.⁸

Also meeting in 1978 was a gathering of nearly two hundred Roman Catholics and Protestants attending the first National Consultation hosted in Bangalore on the theme of ‘Christians of Scheduled Caste Origins.’ At the consultation issues concerning the place and treatment of Christians from scheduled castes were under consideration and open to debate. The consultation recognized that these Christians constituted the majority in the Indian Christian Church and furthermore acknowledged their experiences of discrimination amongst their fellow Christians and within the church’s hierarchical organization.⁹ A year later under the guidance of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) and the William Carey Study and Research Centre (WCSRC) a ‘Theology of the People’ began to develop focusing on the experiences and oppression of outcastes, Tribals, and women. Reflecting upon the consultation, Seral Chatterji, then head of the CISRS, describes Jesus’ ministry to be ‘among the poor,

⁸ Felix Wilfred in his essay, ‘The Problem of a Valid Starting-Point for Theologizing in India,’ has shifted the starting point of theologizing from Christian and Hindu traditions, Scripture, or sociology to the community, ‘its experiences, its tasks and problems,’ 143-44. Wilfred does not specify what these tasks and problems include, but he does refer to the ‘Indian socio-cultural-political-economic situation’ and in a section on pluralism states, ‘the basis for pluralism in Indian theologizing will not be any system or person but the nature of community itself, its experience and its response to God’s Word of love, truth, peace, justice, and freedom,’ 142, 144. Peter Fernando in his essay, ‘Theological Education in India,’ shares a similar sentiment when he states, ‘in our present set up we first teach theology...and then we expect our students to apply that academic theology to life situations. We study answers first and then apply them to the life problems of the people. This is not doing theology...Doing theology is an encounter between faith and life, between revelation and the realities in the world. To do this, both students and teachers of theology in the seminary must be in constant contact with the community in an *Action Reflection* process. Reflection upon the life experiences of the community, and the involvement with the community will provide pastoral issues, problems, and themes for the theological curriculum,’ 245.

⁹ M. Azariah, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology* (Delhi: DLET-ISPCK, 2000), 177. Cited in Dionysius Rasquinha, S.J., ‘A Brief Historical Analysis of the Emergence of Dalit Christian Theology,’ *Vidyajoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 66.5 (2002): 357.

captive, without hope, outcaste and oppressed,’ and the nature of that ministry to be ‘one of deep fellowship with the people in their suffering...one of solidarity with the people shown on the cross...one of redemption and liberation of the totality of the people through his resurrection.’¹⁰ In its crafting a theological response to the social and economic situations of marginalized communities in India, the ‘Theology of the People’ was a critical step in the development of not only Dalit theology but also Indian feminist and Tribal theologies.¹¹

Dalit theology’s emergence was precipitated in the theological movements and concerns of the late 1970’s. The emphasis on context as well as the focused re-centering of theology upon communities, their experiences, and their problems mark the key points of transition from previous approaches to Indian Christian theology and the newer methods of Indian Christian theology. What further distinguishes Dalit theology from Indian Christian theology—old or new—is its identification of the primary problems facing the Indian church and Indian Christians as caste and caste stigmatization and its identification of Indian Christian community as being a primarily Dalit community. It is from these two identifications that Arvind P. Nirmal begins the first steps towards a Dalit Christian theology.

In the spring of 1981 before a gathering of the Carey Society at the United Theological College in Bangalore, A.P. Nirmal delivered a lecture that would begin to lay the foundations of Dalit Christian theology. Originally entitled ‘Towards a Shudra

¹⁰ Seral K. Chatterji, ‘Some Ingredients of a Theology of the People,’ *Religion & Society* 27.4 (1980): 9 in John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK 2009), 291.

¹¹ The contextual theologies of India that have blossomed over the past two decades would do well to remember their shared historical roots in this consultation as they positively seek solidarity with one another and negatively compete for place and recognition in larger national and international ecumenical bodies.

Theology,’ later to be edited and renamed ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology’ and presented at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in 1989, this address initiated a new movement and mission distinct from that of Indian Christian theology by rooting itself in the lived experiences of *Śūdra* and outcaste persons and communities suffering under extreme poverty and oppressive caste stigmatization.¹² Describing the demographics of the Indian church and critiquing the perceived failures of previous Indian Christian theologians, Nirmal states:

What is amazing is the fact that Indian theologians ignored the reality of the Indian Church. While estimates vary, between 50% and 80% of all Christians in India today are of Scheduled Castes origins. This is the most important commonality cutting across the various diversities of the Indian Church which would have provided an authentic liberation *motif* for Indian Christian theology. If our theologians failed to see this in the past, there is more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the task of doing Dalit Theology.¹³

Despite its title and the absence of the term ‘Dalit’ from its pages, Nirmal’s lecture ‘Towards a Christian Shudra Theology’ is nevertheless recognized as the catalyzing text of the Dalit theological movement.¹⁴ Reflecting on the immediate significance of this lecture, theologian Sathianathan Clarke describes the moment as:

¹² Unfortunately the original version of Nirmal’s Carey Society address has not been published nor has a copy been archived. Nirmal admits to some reworking of the address for the later published paper ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology.’ The extent of this reworking, which most probably extends beyond the simple replacement of ‘Shudra’ with ‘Christian Dalit,’ cannot be known for sure. Having a copy of this foundational text would help trace the emergence of Dalit theology from the seminary seminars of the early 1980’s to its more systematic exposition a decade later.

¹³ Arvind P. Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ in *Indigenous People: Dalits: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 217.

¹⁴ In the introduction to his edited volume *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Nirmal reflects upon his 1981 lecture in light of this new volume released ten years later. He states, ‘personally, this publication provides great joy as I see in it a development of my own concern for a liberative Dalit theology which I first articulated in April, 1981 when I delivered the Carey Society Valedictory Address at the United Theological College, Bangalore on the topic: “Towards a Shudra Theology.”’ Nirmal, ‘Introduction,’ in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal et al. (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1991). Nirmal here identifies a seamless continuity between his original address and the more developed forms of Dalit theology presented in this volume. In an early work titled ‘A Dialogue with Dalit Literature’ Nirmal makes clear that the *Shudra* of his *Shudra* Theology is in fact a Dalit. He notes,

A watershed event, in that it called upon Dalits to shun theological passivity and sociological camouflage in order to embrace the more demanding task of reclaiming the liberative ends of theology. The tacit inclination towards theological sanskritization was confronted and a new way that put a motif of liberation at the centre was opened. This model, I believe continues to influence the direction of Dalit based theological reflection.¹⁵

The development of Dalit theology followed a gradual, but steady course after Nirmal's address, and as John C.B. Webster notes even Nirmal himself required several years to further formulate his understanding for the method and model of Dalit theology.¹⁶ In the following year K. Wilson's *The Twice-Alienated: The Culture of Dalit Christians* further challenged the theology, especially soteriology, of traditional Christianity and Indian Christianity. Webster highlights *The Twice-Alienated* as having 'marked the transition into the theology of mid-1980's'¹⁷ and Dionysius Rasquinha, S.J. states that it 'clearly shifted and clarified the direction of Indian Christian theology in the line of Dalit Christian theology.'¹⁸ Wilson's work focused upon the cultural and

'[the address] provoked a great deal of discussion. It was pointed out that the word "Sudra" as well as "Harijan" were resented by those to whom they were applied. I found out that the so-called Sudras preferred to be addressed as dalits. I further learned that there was already a dalit or Dalit Panther movement for liberation...I heard that in Maharashtra, towards the end of the sixties, a new trend in Marathi literature known as Dalit Sahitya movement had captured the imagination of Dalit writers. When I moved to Pune in 1981, I decided to study this movement closely.' Nirmal, 'A Dialogue with Dalit Literature,' in *Towards a Dalit Theology*, ed. M.E. Prabhakar (Delhi: ISPCK, 1988), 66.

¹⁵ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 45. Seventeen years after Nirmal's lecture before the Carey Society, Clarke delivered his own lecture in which he describes his experience of being a student audience member at Nirmal's. He states, 'as an Orientation student in the B.D. program I remember sitting through Nirmal's talk with awe and nervousness. I was mesmerized by the passionate creativity with which he tentatively carved out a trail for an authentic, resourceful, and imaginative expression of Indian theology. I was also nervous about the stridently confrontational nature of his talk in which he subtly, though forcefully, countered the dominating castes. Even then I wanted to be part of the movement...I was convinced that the contextual core of liberation theology in India had to do with the emancipation of the Dalits.' Clarke, 'Subaltern Culture as Resource for People's Liberation: A Critical Inquiry into Dalit Culture Theory,' *Religion & Society* 44.4 (1997): 84-85.

¹⁶ Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, 292. A good part of this time was spent reflecting upon the Maharashtran literary and political movements of the previous decades.

¹⁷ Ibid., 293

¹⁸ Rasquinha, 363. Rasquinha provides here a concise historical overview of the origins of Dalit theology that both supports and supplements—especially with regards to Catholic contributions to Dalit theology—Webster's wider survey of Christianity and the Dalits.

psychological impact that traditional treatments of soteriology had upon Dalit Christian communities. Equating the doctrine of sin with forms of Hindu social dharma, Wilson argues that the emphasis on personal and individual sin over social and institutional sin resulted in a depoliticized, alienated, and self-denigrating Dalit community. The necessity for divine intervention that will arrive at some indeterminate date created a passive community waiting for rather than participating in their own liberation. Traditional theology not only left Dalit Christians ill equipped to address their social condition theologically and politically, but seemed to support this condition in the absence of any negation of it. Wilson's critique highlights a thread of thought long held by Dalit activists and one that will continue to influence Dalit Christian theologians: doctrines that posit an inherent weakness or flaw within the human person can operate ideologically as a justification for a community's social location. One of the central aims of the developing Dalit theology will be the deconstruction of such justifications.

If Nirmal and Wilson's early reflections on the relationship between theology and Dalit communities laid the groundwork for the rise of Dalit theology in the mid-1980's, then the formation of the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement (CDLM) in December 1984 and the subsequent conferences it convened marked its arrival. Whereas previous organizations had been structured as a top-down approach to addressing the problems facing Dalit Christians, the CDLM was organized from the bottom up. The group's efforts were directed towards the creation of a Dalit Christian identity and ideology capable of sustaining Dalit communities as they took the struggle for liberation into their own hands. It also sought to establish dialogue with other Dalit religious and political groups in an effort to ally itself with already existing ideological bases and to help

formulate its own understanding of Dalitness. Though previous movements had begun to articulate a theological response to the problems facing Scheduled Caste Christians, the CDLM occasioned the first instance in which theologians and pastors linked ‘Dalit’ with Christian theology.¹⁹ The last half of the decade would be dedicated to fleshing out the particularity of this newly named theology.

With the conclusion of the final conference in December 1986—a joint meeting of the CISRS and the CDLM in Chennai on the theme of ‘Towards a Dalit Theology’—Dalit theology now had firmly planted itself on the Christian Indian theological landscape. In 1987 Gurukul Lutheran Theological College established the first department of Dalit Theology. Headed by Nirmal and recognized by the Senate of Serampore College—the governing body for mainline Protestant theological education in India—Gurukul offered courses at the B.D. and M.Th. level. The following year saw the publication of the first of three collections of essays *Towards a Dalit Theology*, *Emerging Dalit Theology* (1990), and *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (1991) each pushing the new field into greater prominence and establishment. As their titles suggest, these collections transitioned from tentative and experimental approaches—arguing for the necessity for a Dalit theology, identifying its appropriate sources and foundations, and establishing its proper aims and objectives—to articulating a more robust conception of what Dalit Theology is.²⁰

¹⁹ Webster identifies the formation of the CDLM as the fruits of a critical shift ‘in the self-understanding taking place among educated Dalit Christians.’ The most significant of which ‘is seen in the name of the movement itself, which highlights the Dalit identity shared with other Dalits instead of the submerging it into a common Christian identity shared with Christians from higher caste backgrounds.’ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 239. This shift in identification with greater emphasis being placed on Dalit than on Christian will set the theological trajectory of Dalit theology for the next quarter century as Dalit theologians seek to recover and establish Dalit identity as the foundation for theological inquiry.

²⁰ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 294.

V. Devasahayam's 1997 edited work *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* completed the first generation's efforts through the piecemeal construction of a systematic Dalit theology including essays on revelation, hermeneutics, Christology, pneumatology, and anthropology. Within fifteen years Dalit theology had moved out of faculty seminar rooms and into the classrooms of Indian seminaries and the pulpits of Indian churches. It also gained international recognition through the participation of pastors, professors, and students in ecumenical and confessional organizations like the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). Presently, Dalit theology continues to grow under the scholarship and pastoral work of a new generation of Dalit academics, theologians, and pastors who continue to turn a critical eye towards the problems that the Dalit communities face today.

Both Webster and Rasquinha identify the formation the CDLM and its proceeding conferences as the moments for the emergence of Dalit theology. Their dating of its arrival is based upon the first proper linkage between 'Dalit' and 'theology' in which Dalitness became the lens through which theological reflection occurs. Though Dalit theology presents a new starting point and new method for doing Christian theology in India and is a marked break from traditional approaches, it is not without antecedents both within India and abroad. Already in the second half of 1970's in the 'Theology of the People,' theology in India began to concern itself with questions of social injustice, economic oppressions, and political and theological representation. The impetus for this turn is found in the influx and influence of Latin American liberation theology and Black theology. Both provided not only methodological insight into the kinds of questions theology could and should be asking, but also encouragement that such theologies are

viable and transformative. As it internalizes and re-presents these models, Dalit theology emerges as a hybrid of the two—a phenomenon not unique to Dalit theology as many of the new theologies of liberation in Asia focus on the particular context of poverty in the region.²¹ As a doubly oppressed minority within a minority, Dalit theologians draw upon the inspiration of Black theology to instill a sense of self-worth and dignity within the individual and community. As a group that comprises the poorest of the poor, they utilize the critical theory of Latin American liberation theology to address theologically the social and economic injustices they face. Like their impact upon Western theology, Black theology and Latin American liberation theology awoke Indian Christian theology to a set of issues that had been inadequately addressed theologically and provided a method and grammar for reflecting upon them. There would be no Dalit theology without their influence.

The particularity of Dalit theology, that is what differentiates it from being a mere repackaging of Latin American liberation theology and Black theology, derives not from the novelty of its method, but from its self-identification with a particular liberative movement already operative in India. To say alongside Webster and Rasquinha that Dalit theology is born in the linking of Dalit, i.e. the modern Dalit movement, with Christian theology is essential, if seemingly tautological. In relation to the dominant trends of Indian Christian theology—identified by Dalit theology to include the predominance of high caste Christians in positions of authority (pastoral and academic) and the preponderance of dialoguing with, reflecting upon, and appropriating high caste Hindu

²¹ Paul Knitter and Aloysius Pieris, S.J. describe the particularity of this context as ‘the many poor and the many religions.’ Paul Knitter, ‘Foreword,’ in Aloysius Pieris, S.J., *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), xi. For Pieris the context of Christian Church in Asia is defined by both poverty and religious plurality—in which Christians are often the religious minority.

traditions—Dalit theology does present a new method for doing Christian theology in India. However, while novel in Indian Christian circles, ideas like Dalit consciousness, Dalit emancipation from the oppressiveness of high caste, Brahmanical religion, and Dalit assertion of religious, political, social, economic, and educational rights have been long held concepts in a radical intellectual current flowing out of Maharashtra beginning in the 1850's.

This thread begins with the work of poet, playwright, publisher, educator, and agitator Jotiba Phule, is expanded upon by the leadership of politician, social activist, and Indian constitution framer Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, is recovered by the Marathi-literati-challenging, Dalit consciousness proclaiming poets and writers of the Dalit Sahitya movement, and is further radicalized in the anger and militancy of the Dalit Panthers—whom were organized more than a century after Phule's first pronouncements against caste and untouchability were first made. Although Latin American liberation theology, Black theology, and the developing Third World theologies provided the methodology, tools, and initial catalyst for Indian Christian theologians to reflect upon the conditions of Dalit communities, it is to this particular Maharashtran intellectual thread which Dalit theology had been awakened. It is out of this Maharashtran tradition that the first Dalit theologians developed and articulated the 'Dalitness' of Dalit theology.²²

²² The success of the Maharashtran movement and its subsequent influence upon Christian Dalit theology owes itself to a unique set of economic, social, and political circumstances which allowed it not only to be sustained, but to flourish while many of the contemporaneous and even previous movements from other regions fizzled out. Although these cannot be explored in greater detail here, Eleanor Zelliot identifies six 'essential factors' that allowed the Maharashtran movement to succeed where others failed. These are: '1. A leadership released from traditional service [and followers with some economic freedom]. 2. Grievances understood and felt by both the "elite" members of the caste and the masses. 3. Some form of legitimization of the new non-traditional Mahar ambition both within the caste and among members of the elite in the larger society. 4. A group of "brokers"—men who could serve as links between the caste and the institutions of power in society, or who knew how to use modern channels of change. 5. Channels for communication, both within the group and from the group to the public. 6. Some form of protection for

Dalit theology represents not only a new chapter in Indian Christian theology, but also in the modern Dalit movement. In order to locate properly its place within both traditions it is necessary to examine the history of each so as to see how it breaks from traditional approaches to Indian Christian theology and to comprehend how it appropriates the central concepts of the modern Dalit movement. The former will be taken up in next chapter; what follows here is a genealogy of the Dalit movement as it develops out of Maharashtra. Although there existed other contemporaneous ‘Dalit’ movements, most notably Periyar E.V. Ramasamy’s South Indian ‘Self-Respect Movement,’ that do contribute to Dalit theology, only the Maharashtran movement can claim a truly familial relationship with Dalit theology.²³

The Maharashtran Influence: The ‘Dalit’ of Dalit Christian Theology

Jyotiba Phule: Recovering a History

Contemporaneous with the broader social reform movements sweeping through India in the 19th c., Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), later to earn the honorific title Mahatma, was born into the *Mali* caste—considered to be one of the *Śūdra* castes of Maharashtra.²⁴ Phule’s education began at a village school outside of Pune; however, according to his biographers, his initial studies were interrupted after a Brahman clerk persuaded

protestors when the overstepping of traditional boundaries brought retaliation.’ For further insight into the significance and implications of these factors see Eleanor Zelliot, *From untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1992), 34.

²³ In the following genealogy I have attempted to maintain the linguistic development of the movement by using the terms each stage uses for Dalit persons and communities rather than anachronistically supplying Dalit when speaking about Dalits. ‘Dalit’s’ rise to prominence as the preferred appellation is a critical moment in the modern Dalit movement that can be obscured by the tendency of historians to retroactively replace these earlier names.

²⁴ G.P. Deshpande, ‘Of Hope and Melancholy: Reading Jotirao Phule in Our Times,’ in *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, ed. G.P. Deshpande (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2002), 2.

Govindroa, Phule's father, to put the boy to work tending crops.²⁵ Three years later Phule returned to his studies at a Scottish mission school run by Murray Mitchell where he completed his secondary education in 1847. The following year Phule's revolutionary career began in the humble yet socially radical establishment of India's first school for *shudratishudra* girls.²⁶ Alongside his early education initiatives, Phule performed public acts that openly challenged Maharashtra's caste conventions. Embracing early on the maxim that 'revolutionary thought had to be backed by revolutionary praxis,' he made available—and made known its availability—his personal water tank to the untouchable community.²⁷ However, it was not until the release of his play *Tratiya Ratna, The Third Eye* that Phule's 'distinctive focus upon Brahmins, and Brahmanic religion, as the cause of the deprivations' of *shudratishudras* began to become more public and concentrated.

Rosalind O'Hanlon states:

Where Phule differed from his colleagues, and where he drew together religious and political relationships between western Indian society to form his own distinctive brand of anticlericalism, was to regard Hindu religion as the world view of specifically Brahman social groups. This worldview served Brahman interests both in matters of religious authority and in secular spheres of

²⁵ Rosalind O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Jotirao Phule and Lower Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Maharashtra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 110. Though difficult to document the exact reasoning for the three year break in Phule's education, many of his biographers including Keer attribute it to the Brahman clerk's fear that the soon to be educated Phule would be able to replace him in Govindrao's store. *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁶ *Shudra-atishudra* was Phule's own designation for the *Shudra*-outcaste, *Mang-Mahar* communities of Maharashtra. His commitment to women's issues extended beyond education to include also advocacy for widow remarriage as well as opening both a home for widowed high caste women and a nursery to help curtail female infanticide.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. The usage of the word 'perform' does not mean to suggest that Phule's actions were a kind of 'acting,' a mere playing the part, but rather to draw out the theatrics inherent in such public displays of disobedience and the aesthetics that would soon accompany Dalit movements and protests. Dalit theology often understands itself to be a counter theology, that it presents a counter ideology, that its culture is counter cultural. Similarly, movements towards Dalit emancipation perform in something akin to what Mark Taylor calls 'theatrics of counterterror.' These are embodied and public forms of protest that seek to counter and to defy the terror performed and enacted upon Dalit bodies and psyches. Theatrics of counterterror are more deliberate and in-your-face than simply practicing what you preach. They are, to borrow one of Nirmal's understandings of the word 'dalit,' to make manifest the suffering endured and the freedom desired by Dalits. Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2001).

administrative power, occupational competition, and the ability itself to comprehend the realities of political relationships within society. Although other castes might accept it, Brahmanic religion could represent for them only a false consciousness and unknowing servitude to the interests of Brahmans themselves.²⁸

Composed in 1855, although narrowly circulated and never widely published, *The Third Eye* lays the religious, social, and political foundation for Phule's later work.²⁹ The play features a young, uneducated peasant couple susceptible to the scheming of a sly Brahman priest and their eventual enlightenment following a chance encounter with a Christian missionary.³⁰ The Brahman priest and the peasant couple represent the two primary problems that *shudratishudras* had to confront if they were ever to gain an equal footing in Indian society. The first is the Brahmanical religious, social, economical, and political system that was established to maintain Brahmanical dominance at the expense of all other castes, but especially *shudras* and *atishudras*, through religious practices, customs, rituals, and superstitions. The second is the lack of education and educational opportunities for *shudratishudras* who were wanting not only for the tools to confront and topple this oppressive system, but also an awareness that there was such a system even to confront. In Phule's understanding the system was maintained on both ends with one group purposefully perpetuating caste under the pretense of religion for social and economic gain and the other ignorantly complicit in their own subordination. The liberating knowledge offered by the Christian missionary concerns itself less with

²⁸ O'Hanlon, 123.

²⁹ O'Hanlon argues persuasively that the title of the play is a double allusion: First to the third eye of Shiva implying the wrath and destructive intent of the play's polemic and second a reference to what social reformer Gopal Hari Deshmukh called the 'third eye' born from the new kinds of education brought by the British which gave students 'new modes of perception and new ideas and information with which to understand Indian society.' Ibid., 123.

³⁰ The Christian missionary is most probably a stand in for Phule as the theistic, iconoclastic sermon he preaches resembles very much the religious beliefs associated with *sarvajanic satya dharma* the religion that Phule developed. Enlightenment, akin to conscientization, here means realizing the falsity of Brahmanical, religious superstition and the role it plays in one's own oppression.

revealing the truths of Christianity than in revealing the falsehoods of Brahminical Hinduism.³¹ For the remainder of his life Phule would dedicate himself to the eradication of *shudratishudra* ignorance and Brahman power both of which were antithetical to *dalitodhar*—uplift of the oppressed.³²

Phule's methodological approach to countering Brahmanism—his writings rarely refer to Hinduism—would become common tactics in later Maharashtra born anti-Brahman, anti-caste movements. His objective was to create a community out of the exploited and oppressed *shudratishudras* united against and capable of combating Brahmanism. His means oscillated between scathing critiques of Brahmanism and emphasis on modern modes of education—emphasizing scientific knowledge over and against religious, ritual knowledge.³³ With the foundation of the *Satyashodakh Samaj* (Truth-seeking Society) in 1873, Phule and the society developed programs to educate the masses and reduce Brahmanical ritualistic power.³⁴ His reflection on caste and Brahmanism led to his belief that instead of the traditional *chaturvarnya* conception of caste—a system compromised of the four *varṇa* caste groups—caste should be understood more appropriately as *dvaivarnik*-consisting of two *varṇas*. In his schema there are only Brahmins and non-Brahmins, and it is this reconfiguration of caste that

³¹ Christianity also is a stand in for the broader Western intellectual schools like rationalism and humanism, which provided philosophical tools to attack Brahmanism.

³² Eleanor Zelliot argues that this is the first instance that the Marathi word *dalit*—defined in Molesworth's *Marathi-English Dictionary* 1831 as ground, broken or reduced to pieces—is used in reference to caste. Zelliot, *From untouchable to Dalit*, 271.

³³ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 99.

³⁴ For the latter, Phule encouraged *shudratishudras* to develop their own religion and rituals and he himself developed a rural marriage ritual that excised the role of the Brahman priest from the proceedings. Omvedt describes Phule's project as, 'Ideologically, the unity, rather the community of the exploited was sought to be built up first, by emphasizing the attack on Brahmanism and exploitation through religion, and second, by stressing the necessity of modern education and the acquisition of scientific knowledge, described as *vidya*, seen as in contrast to the Brahmanic and ritual-bound *shastra*.' Ibid., 99.

allowed the *Satyashodakh Samaj* to become perhaps the most diverse—in relation to caste membership--social organization in India at that time.³⁵

Phule's dual approach aimed at developing a critical and historical consciousness amongst *shudratishudras* by awakening them to the origins and particularities of their suffering. Building upon the 'Aryan Invasion' theory, the explanation and, at times, defense of Indian society in general and caste in particular, Phule embraced and modified the theory to create what Gail Omvedt calls, 'the first historical materialist theory of caste.'³⁶ Phule believed that Brahmanism and caste were historically and socially constructed ideologies not eternal, revealed, and divinely ordained systems. The acceptance of the 'Aryan Invasion' theory provided Phule with historical proof that invading Brahmanical forces had violently subjected the original inhabitants of India to these systems and had couched and legitimated their oppression in religious language and dogma. In his skillful hands the theory also permitted the proposition that Brahmanism and caste could and should be viewed as foreign, tyrannical, and deadly imports into India. This move allowed space for Phule to fashion a new counter mythology that idealized and romanticized a pristine past destroyed, and even more importantly created a past that could be restored.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 98. The concept of a two caste system aimed not only at increasing the possible pool of supporters to include all castes except Brahmins, but also to thoroughly simplify the complexities of caste and caste relationships. M.S. Gore summarizes well Phule's project: 'The leader of the movement has also to formulate a relatively simple message and create an ideology. The main message was the villainy of the brahman, the separate identity of the "shudra" and the ideology of the "satya dharma." The logic of the caste situation in India is not a dichotomy of statuses but a plurality of statuses in which there is on the one hand a notion of hierarchy and, on the other a measure of relative status ambiguity. It was important that the plurality and ambiguity of the caste society be simplified. The effort to create an Arya-Shudra dichotomy was an effort to forge unity among the non-brahmins and mobilize them on a simple slogan against an identifiable target group.' M.S. Gore, *Non-Brahman Movement in Maharashtra* (New Delhi: Segment Book, 1989), 47

³⁶ Ibid., 23.

³⁷ In a Foucauldian twist, the 'Aryan Invasion theory' was at first welcomed by many upper caste Indians as proof to both their equality with their light skinned colonial rulers and their superiority over the

Such re-mythologizing, such ‘subaltering’ is a common tool in the Dalit arsenal to challenge their low social standing and combat karmic explanations for their circumstances.³⁸ Across India, Dalit communities recite and craft collective origin myths that trace their fall to an ancestor—often a Brahman—tricked into or by accident becoming an outcaste.³⁹ Robert Deliege argues that such myths present an ambiguity towards caste and pollution that reflects the Dalits own ambiguous place in society as neither fully marginalized nor fully part of society.⁴⁰ Although these myths allow Dalit individuals to distance themselves from *karma* by transferring the origin of their low social status to a distant ancestor rather than the evil deeds of their own previous lives, these myths nevertheless operate within and are dependent upon the caste/pollution

darker skinned lower castes. However as nationalistic rhetoric emerged challenging colonial rule from nonnative outsiders, anti-Brahman groups were able to reshape the theory and create a new narrative that presented *shudratishudras* as the original inhabitants of India suffering under two forms of colonial domination and exploitation. O’Hanlon states, ‘Certainly, the conviction that the Maratha-*kunbis* were the original inhabitants of Western India was to be a crucial element in the longer-term emergence of a distinctive ‘Maratha’ identity with its accompanying demands for the redress of economic religious and educational inequalities.’ O’Hanlon, 151.

³⁸ In his taxonomy of Dalit dissent, Peniel Rufus Rajkumar identifies re-mythologizing and mythologization as ‘subalteration’ and locates it between survival—‘a form of dissent that usually manifests in the form of accommodative strategies’—and subversion—the ‘most radical and overt form of Dalit dissent’ in which ‘old templates are overtly debunked and new templates of identity and meaning are validated.’ Rajkumar notes that subalteration, the “‘disguised discourses” of noncompliance by the discriminated against... is a domain of specific meaning making through which they tactfully contest the inferior identity ascribed to them.’ Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar, ‘The Diversity and Dialectics of Dalit Dissent and Implications for a Dalit Theology of Liberation,’ in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, ed. Sathianathan Clarke et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 56-57.

³⁹ Robert Deliege offers a collection of such myths from the Paraiyar Dalit community in Tamil Nadu. The following is one variation of it: ‘In the beginning, there were two brothers who were poor. Then they went together to pray to God. God asked them to remove the carcass of a dead cow. The elder brother answered: “*Een thambi pappan*” (My younger brother will do it) but understood: “*Een thambi paappaan*” (My younger brother is a Brahman); since that very day, the younger brother became Brahman (*paappaan*) and the elder brother became a Paraiyar. All castes originate from these two brothers.’ Robert Deliege, ‘The Myths of Origin of the Indian untouchable,’ *Man* 28.3 (1993): 536. S.M. Michael offers another example: ‘According to one particular origin myth, the original Dalit was a Brahmin who came upon a cow caught mired in the mud. Intending to help the cow (a meritorious intent), he pulled the cow by its tail. But the cow died and since he had been in contact with a dead cow, a polluting contact, his older brothers outcasted him and he became the first “untouchable.”’ S.M. Michael, *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), 27 cited in Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms, and Possibilities* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 123.

⁴⁰ Deliege, ‘The Myths of Origin,’ 535.

system that maintains their oppression.⁴¹ Describing Dalits and such myths as taking caste for a granted reality, Deliege states:

They have not developed a ‘counter-culture,’ and have generally tried to improve their position within the system itself than replace it altogether. As such, the myths discussed here do not provide ‘models for action,’ nor even challenge untouchability, but they do make status mobility ideologically possible and ethically acceptable. Even the most traditional untouchables do not believe that their position is God-given, or that it would be sinful to change it. On the contrary, seeing their ancestor as generous, pious, hardworking and honest helps to reassure them that any attempt to improve their status is justified.⁴²

Phule’s aim, and what would be the objective of subsequent Maharashtra anti-Brahman, anti-caste movements, was to establish a counter culture by first establishing a counter history. Using the supposed historicity of the Aryan Invasion and a bit of Marathi wordplay, Phule argued that *shudratishudras* heralded from a rebellious band of *Kṣatriyas* who had fought against the invading Brahmans. Prior to the invasion and the resulting imposition of caste and untouchability, all inhabitants of the *kshetra* (Marathi for field, place) were *Kṣatriyas*—by which Phule meant all those living together peaceably on the land before the arrival of the Brahman invaders.⁴³ The Mahars and Mangs especially suffered post-invasion as they proved to be the most combative and the *maha-ari* (greatest enemy) to Brahman rule. Describing the origins of untouchability and the failure of other non-Brahman castes to realize their common roots, Phule states:

They did not realize that their ancestors were all of one house, and that the Brahmans had ruined the Mahars and the Mangs in this way because they had fought against them with special force. Thus, the Brahmans caused these divisions to be set up, and taught the other castes to hate Mahars and Mangs.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Clarke offers an important assessment of these myths of origin that recognizes their significant role in sustaining and preserving Dalit communities. Though such myths do not offer a developed counter-cultural ideology, they are counter-cultural in their resistance to accept cultural and religious explanations for the Dalit community’s position in society. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 45-46.

⁴² Deliege, ‘The Myths of Origin,’ 547.

⁴³ O’Hanlon, 136.

⁴⁴ Jotirao Phule, *Slavery*, Keer and Malshe (eds.), 91. *Slavery* opens with the following dedication, ‘To/The good people of the United States/As a token of admiration for their/Sublime *disinterested* and *self-*

In his work *Gulamagiri: Slavery*, Phule continues his project of historicizing the origins of caste through the appropriation of the invasion theory, but extends his efforts to include here also the demythologization of Vishnu's various incarnations. According to Phule, Matsya, the fish; Kurma, the tortoise; Varaha, the boar; Narasimha, the man-lion; Vaman, the dwarf; and Parashuram, Rama with the axe correspond not to the first six avatars of Vishnu, but instead to the first military leaders of the Aryan invasion.⁴⁵ The downfall of these *Kṣatriyas* was near complete when the Brahman dwarf Vaman defeated Bali and finally completed in Parashuram's ultimate rout of the *maha-ari*—the until then unconquered remnant of the *Kṣatriyas*. The surviving *maha-ari* were banished and subjected to what would later become untouchability. Phule writes:

In order that they should never again lift up their hand against the Brahmins, he had a black thread tied around the neck of each of them as a sign, and prohibited even the Shudra brothers from touching them. He introduced the practice of calling these *maha-ari* Kshatriyas by names of *ati-Shudra*, *Mahar*, *antyaj*, *Mang* and *Chandal*.⁴⁶

However, Phule broke with the succession of avatars in order to insert between Vaman and Parashuram a clerk turned leader named Brahma. Phule, as O'Hanlon correctly suggests, 'felt that the figure Brahma had a special importance in legitimating conventional religious hierarchies, and represented an important target for reinterpretation.'⁴⁷ This insertion allowed Phule both to devalue and discredit the significance of the Vedas as 'scratching on palm leaves...[a collection of] some magical

sacrificing/Devotion in the cause of Negro/Slavery; and with an earnest desire,/that my countrymen may take/their noble example as their guide/in the emancipation of these Shudra/Brethren from the trammels of/Brahmin thralldom.' Dhananjay Keer, *Mahatma Jotirao Phoolley: Father of Our Social Revolution* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1964), 112.

⁴⁵O'Hanlon, 143. Conversely those figures like the demons Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu and especially King Bali were considered heroes and true protectors of the land.

⁴⁶ Phule, *Slavery*, 114, quoted in O'Hanlon, 146.

⁴⁷ O'Hanlon, 146.

incantations and false fables...[and] little poems...like those of the Parsis' and to propose that the *Shudras* ban from religious education was born from the Brahman's fear 'lest Shudras should remember their former greatness, and then rebel against authority.'⁴⁸

Slavery as a subaltern and subverting treatise on the origins of caste and Brahmanical dominance sought to impart such a memory of greatness and to instill such a sense of revolutionary rebellion. What distinguishes this mythologization from other 'high caste fallen to outcaste' myths is its attempt to historicize these events through the violent, Aryan Invasion theory and to reject the caste as system and untouchability as being anything other than an oppressive measure to ensure that those who posed the greatest threat to Brahman rule would be shunned by the rest of society. Phule simultaneously re-mythologizes a golden pre-Aryan past that knows of no such caste distinctions and de-mythologizes Hindu religion, its sacred texts, and justification for caste and untouchability. He does not take the caste system for granted, but rather understands it to be a historically created ideology of dominance and oppression—recognizing a time before caste and working towards a time in which caste will be no more.

Under Phule's leadership and example the anti-Brahman, anti-caste movements slowly began to take on a bottom-up revolutionary character. Phule was not interested in reform—a term he found to be too wedded to preserving the status quo—he was interested in revolution—a revolution beginning first in the *shudratishudra* psyche and then spreading out into society. Writing on Phule's behalf, Mama Pramand wrote to the Dewan of Baroda—himself an active non-Brahman movement supporter—saying:

⁴⁸ Phule, *Slavery*, 115-116, quoted in O'Hanlon, 145-146.

His last great service is concerned with what he calls the emancipation of the Maratha mind...I believe, that the Maratha element in Deccan and elsewhere shows that consciousness of its wrongs, desires for amelioration and freedom from the implicit submission to the higher castes merely as such which did not exist before.⁴⁹

For the *shudratishudra* revolution to be successful low caste and outcaste communities, 'needed to be made conscious of their oppression and social exclusion by Hindu scripture and society, and they had to be confident of the independent validity of their own beliefs, practices and cultural heritage.'⁵⁰ Through his writings, organizations, insistence on education, and proclivity for agitation, Phule made explicit the origins and nature of *shudratishudra* suffering, recovered a lost history, and posited a new future. However, M.S. Gore's final assessment that, 'on the whole it would appear that Jotirao was not as good an organizer as he was a visionary, articulator, and inspirer' is a fair one.⁵¹ Although he was unable to implement many of the changes he sought, Phule had initiated the first steps towards Dalit conscientization and with him the modern Dalit movement began.⁵²

⁴⁹ Mama Paramanand to Ramachandrarao Dhmnaskar, Bombay 31 July 1890, quoted in Keer, *Mahatma Jotirao Phoooley*, 269.

⁵⁰ Philip Constable, "Early Dalit Literature and Culture in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Western India," *Modern Asian Studies* 31.2 (1997): 319

⁵¹ M.S. Gore, *Non-Brahman Movement*, 48.

⁵² Aware of the liberties that education and conscientization could create, Phule envisioned a possible future in which, 'a great man would spring up from amongst them [*shudratishudras*], would shower flowers on tombs and declare victory and joy in our names.' For many of the *shudratishudras* in Maharashtra and for Dalits throughout India Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was this great man of whom Phule had foretold. Prakash Louis, 'Dalit Intellectuals and Dalit Discourse,' *Satyam Nilam* 6 (2004): 23.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Raising a Consciousness

While Phule may be identified as the first catalyst for the Maharashtra Dalit movement, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar is undoubtedly its most iconic figure.⁵³ In cities and towns throughout India one can walk down avenues that bear his name or congregate in plazas beneath his statue, which most always depict him wearing glasses, holding the Indian constitution, and in a western styled suit.⁵⁴ Born in the year following Phule's death, Ambedkar (1891-1956) benefitted greatly from the early Maharashtra reforms—especially education reform—that Phule and his contemporaries were able to implement.⁵⁵ He was a *Mahar* by birth and thus a member of Maharashtra's largest untouchable caste group. Ambedkar excelled as a student and with the financial support of Sayajirao Gaikwad, the Maharaja of Baroda, he was able to continue his studies in the United States at Columbia University where he received a masters in sociology and a

⁵³ Ambedkar dedicated his work *Who were the Shudras?* to Phule. The inscription reveals Ambedkar's recognition of Phule's contributions to the modern Dalit movement. Ambedkar writes of Phule, 'The Greatest Shudra of modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule.' B.R. Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras?* in Vasant Moon, ed., *Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990), v. Quoted in Arvind Sharma, 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion and the Emergence of the Caste System in India,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73.3 (2005): 846.

⁵⁴ Prior to President Obama's 2010 visit to India, Dalit activists Kancha Ilaiah and Joseph D'Souza wrote an op-ed piece for the Karnataka English daily *The Deccan Herald* encouraging both the Indian government and the US President to acknowledge Ambedkar's contribution to India. Suggestions included a visit to where Ambedkar converted to Buddhism and the laying of a garland on Ambedkar's statue at parliament. Though President Obama did neither, his reference to Ambedkar in his speech before parliament dominated the immediate headlines after its deliverance—commentary on the policy content would follow the next day. 'Obama should Pay Homage to Ambedkar,' *The Deccan Herald*, September 24, 2010. President Obama, as a Chicagoan, also recognized Swami Vivekananda in his address.

⁵⁵ The benefit of these reforms was coupled with Maharashtra's unique circumstances, which Zelliott identified as essential for the success of the Mahar movement. Throughout his career but especially at its earliest stages, Ambedkar enjoyed the support, financial and otherwise, of certain caste Hindu reformers. The Gaikwad of Baroda, whose policies supported the education of untouchable youths, also supported Ambedkar throughout his graduate studies both in the United States and in England. Upon his return many of these same reformers encouraged his leadership, comprised his intellectual circle, staffed his newspapers, and some continued to support him even as his protests become more and more radical. The 1927 burning of the *Manusmriti* was backed by his Brahman friend G.N. Sahasrabudhe. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 158-159.

doctorate economics and later in the United Kingdom where he received a D.Sc. from the London School of Economics and gained entrance to the Bar from Grey's Inn, London.

Ambedkar emerged as the lead spokesman and champion for untouchables as much by circumstance as by his own making.⁵⁶ Although the educational reforms saw a 2300% increase in literacy amongst the Mahars between 1901 and 1921, 97.7% of the population remained illiterate. Zelliott notes, 'of the half a million on the Bombay side of the Marathi-speaking area, there was nearly five thousand male and three thousand female Mahars who were literate. Of these, 288 literate in English, and only one, B.R. Ambedkar, was a college graduate.'⁵⁷ Prior to Ambedkar, non-Mahar leaders and brokers like Vithal Ramji Shinde—a Maratha reformer who founded the Depressed Classes Mission—had championed the untouchable cause through a continuation of Phule's non-Brahman and anti-caste efforts. However, these reformers were not untouchables and were not overly interested in receiving untouchable input on 'untouchability relief.'⁵⁸ As the country moved towards the formation of an independent India the question of untouchable representation remained a contentious one that often pitted Ambedkar against those he perceived to be paternalistic in their treatment of outcaste

⁵⁶ Ambedkar preferred to use the term untouchables for Dalit peoples in order to keep their unique form of oppression at the center of their protest. There is some debate amongst Dalit thinkers as to whether or not Ambedkar used the term 'dalit' in his writings or speeches. Guru Gopal cites two occurrences of the term, but admits it is not common in Ambedkar's writing. In his publication *Bahishkrit Bharat* (Totally Outcaste India), Ambedkar writes, 'Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterizes the exploitations, suppression, and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural, and political domination of the upper castes' Brahminical ideology.' Ambedkar also infrequently would refer to the untouchables as *Pad Dalit*—those crushed under the feet of the Hindu system. Gopal Guru, 'Understanding the Category "Dalit,"' *Vikalp/Alternatives* 6.2 (1998): 65.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 63-64.

⁵⁸ Ambedkar's biographer, Khairmode writes, 'untouchables were tired of Shinde's effort to hold dictatorial monopoly over the movement' and 'neither the government nor the Chandavarkar-Shinde group felt the need for the untouchables themselves to testify, and where as Shinde was invited to testify, Ambedkar himself had to write to the government volunteering his submission' to the Southborough Committee on Reforms. Khairmode, *Ambedkar Volume II*, 46 quoted and paraphrased in Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 145-146.

communities—most famously Mahatma Gandhi. Ambedkar's presentation at the 1919 Southborough Committee in which representation was beginning to be defined marked not only his arrival on to the political scene, but also the beginning of the untouchable movement proper.

Ambedkar initially had not been invited to submit his opinion to the committee. Although he had begun to make a name for himself amongst his fellow Mahars, he was young, inexperienced, and lacked the organizational backing that Shinde and others in the non-Brahman movements possessed. However, having successfully petitioned the committee to be recognized, he delivered a stirring testimony advocating the necessity of untouchables to select their own representatives. He stated:

The right of representation and the right to hold office under the state are the two most important rights that make up citizenship. But the untouchability of the untouchables puts these rights far beyond their reach. In a few places they do not even possess such insignificant rights as personal liberty and personal security. These are the interests of the untouchables. And as can be easily seen, they can be represented by the untouchables alone.⁵⁹

Although at this moment in his young career Ambedkar was not as antagonistic towards Hinduism as those in the non-Brahman movements—he continued to urge untouchables to become more Sanskritized in their practices rather than reject Hinduism outright—he was very much aware of the injustices suffered by untouchables socially and economically as he himself was one.⁶⁰ Before the committee he testified that authentic

⁵⁹ Khaimode, *Ambedkar*, appendix 1, quoted in Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 146.

⁶⁰ Experiencing the plight of the untouchables as an untouchable left Ambedkar with little patience for caste Hindus who claimed to know what was best for the untouchable community and even less for pronouncements like Gandhi's 'I myself have become a Harijan by choice.' As his counter ideology became more developed Ambedkar remained vigilant in protecting his movement from being co-opted into broader nationalist movements like the Congress. Such pronouncements like Gandhi's constituted real threats to Ambedkar's movement as both men firmly believed that they represented the best interests of the untouchable communities and both enjoyed the communities' support. Ambedkar's counter statement, 'I am not a part of the whole, I am a part apart' rejects the liminality—the fusion of identities—presupposed

representation through separate electorates and reservations was essential so that ‘the hardships and disabilities entailed by the social system should not be reproduced and perpetuated in political institutions.’⁶¹ These hardships and disabilities were not limited only to social and economic injustices. However, while politics could be used to address social and economic oppression so long as untouchables represented themselves, they seemed unlikely to alleviate the injustices born from religion and culture.⁶²

Ambedkar, unlike his non-Brahman predecessors and contemporaries, was not ready to abandon Hinduism just yet. But as his anti-untouchability movement *Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha* (BHS-Outcastes’ Welfare Council)—whose motto was the now iconic ‘educate, agitate, and organize’—gained greater independence, enjoyed more support, and began to engage in its own *satyagraha* campaigns, his hope for Hindu religious reform to end untouchability and to open the temples to outcastes wavered. In order to gauge the effects of religious reform, Ambedkar would put the openness and inclusiveness of Hinduism to the test. The Mahad municipality’s recent overturning of

in Gandhi’s statement. One cannot be a harijan by choice as such identities are fixed. The early Ambedkar would reject this statement on the ground of experience: the untouchable communities’ experiences are particular and their oppression unique. In his testimony before the committee he based division on the lack of ‘like-mindedness’ and understood them not to be between ‘Hindu, Mohammadan, Christian, Parsi, Jew, etc. but Touchable Hindu, Untouchable Hindu, Touchable Mohammadan, Untouchable Mohammadan....’ While maintaining the argument from experience, the later Ambedkar would reject Gandhi’s statement on the grounds of religion as well. There was no place for the untouchable in Hinduism for Hinduism had created the untouchable and made her outcaste. The early Ambedkar could support the statement, ‘I am a part of the whole’—a part treated unjustly and in need of protection, but a part nonetheless. The later Ambedkar did not see untouchable and touchable Hindu, but instead untouchable and Hindu. Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 97.

⁶¹ *The Reformers Committee Vol. 2*, Calcutta, 1919, 728-39. Quoted in Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 65.

⁶² In his 1935 work *The Annihilation of Caste* Ambedkar argued for political intervention in religious affairs. Upset with Hinduism failure to undergo self reform he proposed that ‘there should be one standard book of Hindu religion, acceptable to all Hindus; priests should receive their office not by hereditary but by state examinations; priest should be limited in number by law and subject to disciplinary action by the state.’ Zelliott calls these reforms legalist and naïve, but they also demonstrate the progression of Ambedkar’s thought from urged to mandated reform. If Hinduism would not undergo reforms on its own perhaps the state could force the matter. This progression will culminate in Ambedkar’s realization that reform must give way to conversion.

the opening of the Chadvar water tank to the untouchable community provided the movement such an opportunity.

The Mahad *satyagraha* campaign emerged out of the violent aftermath of the Mahad Conference. In late March 1927 Ambedkar met with non-Brahman and untouchable organizers along with several thousand supporters for the first mass rally of the BHS. The selection of Mahad as the site for the first conference was practical. The Mahar migrant community in Mumbai possessed strong ties with the community in Mahad. The movement also enjoyed support from several prominent caste Hindus in the area.⁶³ Furthermore, the Mahad municipality had opened the Chadvar tank to untouchables; however, the resolution had yet to be tested. Should Ambedkar and his followers desire to engage in direct action, the tank provided a public and symbolic place to engage the campaign. As the conference closed, following a series of speeches urging untouchable agency and self-uplift, Anantrao Chitre arose and in giving thanks to the conference organizers ‘threw a bombshell’ by proposing to the crowd that they drink from the tank.⁶⁴ Many including Ambedkar drew water from the tank and drank.

The Mahad caste community response to this perceived transgression was swift and violent. The priest from the Veereshwar Temple adjacent to the tank, fearing that the marchers intended to enter the temple next thus polluting it as well, shouted through the streets that this was indeed their intention. A mob quickly gathered with sticks and stones in hand and severely beat the marchers who had already returned to the original conference grounds. These March 20th events galvanized the Mahar community, and until their mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956 it was remembered and celebrated as

⁶³ Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 151.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Asprushya Swantantra Din (Untouchable Independence Day).⁶⁵ The caste community's reaction also challenged Ambedkar to reconsider untouchability as a purely social construct and a civil rights concern. With the tank having been purified following the March incident and an injunction prohibiting untouchable access to it passed, Ambedkar penned in editorial for his periodical *Bahishkrit Bharata* that continued to question the place of untouchables within Hinduism. He writes:

Some people think that untouchables want to take water from the Chadvar tank, and that violence took place because of that. But we think it is more apt, appropriate, to call the riot a religious war. It is true that we wanted to establish whether or not we are on an equal with other Hindus. It has now become public that caste Hindus have answered a resounding no to this question.⁶⁶

In the summer of 1927 Ambedkar published another editorial in *Bahishkrit Bharat* that revealed the aim of his next planned *satyagraha* campaign. The proposed Mahad water tank campaign would confront Hinduism as well assert the agency of the untouchable and non-Brahman participants. He writes, 'we want to know finally whether or not we are Hindus,'⁶⁷ adding further, 'the question whether we belong to the Hindu religion or not is to be decided by us once and for all.'⁶⁸ The subtle shift in Ambedkar's emphasis between the first and second editorial is important as it points to a change in the objectives of the movement that will become realized in the decision to convert away from Hinduism. The original Mahad campaign had put the test to caste Hindus to demonstrate whether or not untouchables belonged to Hinduism. Their violent response

⁶⁵ Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 151; Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 79; M.S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993), 151.

⁶⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, "Mahad Yethila Dhamasangar va Ingraz Sarkachi Jabadari" [The Religious War in Mahad and Upper-Caste Hindus' Responsibility] BB, April, 22 1927, in Rao, 84

⁶⁷ Ratnakar Ganaveer, ed., *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkaranche Bahishkirt Bharatateel Agralekh*, Nagpur: Ratnamitra Prakashan, 1985, 284-293. Quoted and translated by Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology*, 102.

⁶⁸ Quoted in D. Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2005), 522.

to the possible untouchables' entry into the Veereshwar Temple and the subsequent purification of the tank had provided Ambedkar with an answer. According to the caste Hindus of Mahad, untouchables did not belong to Hinduism. The second *satyagraha* campaign shifted agency. Although the response of caste Hindus would help decide the answer, untouchables would determine for themselves whether or not they belonged to Hinduism.

The second Mahad campaign originally had sought to access the tank again to protest the injunction. News of the previous campaign and its violent conclusion coupled with the movement's grassroots efforts saw the number of supporters in attendance swell above ten thousand. With the case now being handled in the courts and under the advisement of the District Collector, Ambedkar decided not to march on the tank. The campaign transformed into an organizational meeting in which various resolutions were proposed and passed, the most dramatic of which called for the burning of the *Manusmriti*. This last resolution was moved by Gangadhar Neelkanth Sahasrabuddhe, a Brahman associate of Ambedkar, and Ambedkar set aflame those sections that supported the subjugation of women and Shudras.⁶⁹ Ambedkar likened the burning of the *Manusmriti* to Gandhi's call for the burning of foreign cloth and he understood it to be a symbolic purging of teachings he considered antithetical to true Hinduism. Three years following the Mahad campaign, Ambedkar still identified himself as a *Sanatan* Hindu.⁷⁰

Despite his self-identification as a Hindu, the seed for conversion had been planted already in the assertion of untouchable agency. The failure of subsequent *satyagraha* campaigns aimed at temple entry and the impotency of reformist agendas in

⁶⁹ Rao, 80.

⁷⁰ Gore, 106.

general led Ambedkar to focus on securing political and social rights for the Dalit community. In a meeting with Gandhi in the Yerawada Jail in February 1933 Ambedkar presents the shift in his concerns. He states:

I do not think that temple entry will make any material difference to the present conditions of untouchables. On the other hand if they get political rights they will also gain social status and their social and religious disabilities will disappear automatically. From this point of view I consider political rights to be important...If without going into fundamentals we only devote our attention to details like temple entry we would have to wage a separate fight at every step! Besides, no reformer should forget that preoccupation with details often results in a neglect with basic principles.⁷¹

In a 1934 correspondence with Bhaurao Gaikwad, Ambedkar revealed the intentions behind his *satyagraha* campaigns. He states that he did not engage in these campaigns in order for:

the Depressed classes to become worshippers of idols which they were prevented from worshipping or because I believed that temple entry would make them equal members in and an integral part of Hindu society...[but because it was the] best way of energizing Depressed Classes and making them conscious of their position.⁷²

Though this remark suggests that Ambedkar had always conceived of the campaigns as projects for the conscientization of outcaste communities, it downplays the transformation of both Ambedkar and the movement and reveals more his dissatisfaction with the reformist movements rather than an always-held belief. His previous statements depict a gradual progression from passivity to activity as he and the movement began to assert greater agency in creating their identity. The emphasis shifted from identifying what was acceptable for caste Hindus—and working to expand that category to secure a place for outcastes within it—to what is acceptable for outcastes. Realizing that social and economic change could not be secured through religious reform, Ambedkar

⁷¹ Ibid., 142, 144.

⁷² Rao, 101.

redirected his efforts towards the political. That said, Ambedkar did not abandon religion all together, and instead embraced its counter-ideological potency as an essential component for outcaste uplift. Here identity becomes central to the movement as Ambedkar charged his fellow untouchables to no longer passively accept the identity that caste Hindus have forced upon them, and instead, to actively participate in the forging of a new identity. If Hinduism had no place for untouchables, untouchables would have no place for Hinduism.

Ambedkar completed his transformation from *Sanatan* Hindu to open convert at Yeola in 1935 when he issued his famous vow to abandon Hinduism. He states, ‘Because we have the misfortune to call ourselves Hindus, we are treated thus. If we were members of another faith, none dare treat us so... We shall repair our mistake now. I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of an untouchable but I will not die a Hindu for this is in my power.’⁷³ The Yeola statement marks the culmination of Ambedkar’s and the movement’s realization of individual and communal agency. The movement began as an attempt at a bottoms-up reform of Hinduism in which untouchables would demonstrate the necessity for reform through their public persecution. When such attempts failed to elicit any sustained positive response from the broader caste Hindu public, Ambedkar recast his campaigns as programs for untouchable conscientization. Untouchables would become critically aware of their subjugated place in society and seek their own means to achieve liberation.

Much of his efforts over the next twenty years of his life would be dedicated to securing political and social measures to help ensure this freedom. However, as contributive to this end as his political efforts—like the drafting of the Indian

⁷³ B.R. Ambedkar, *Bombay Chronicle*, October 16, 1935. In Rao, 118.

constitution—would be for untouchables throughout India, the most impactful decision Ambedkar made began at Yeola and ended at Nagpur in 1956 with his conversion to Buddhism alongside 500,000 of his supporters. Here Ambedkar fulfilled his vow to not die a Hindu, and here the counter ideology of the modern Dalit movement became manifest.

Having decided to convert, Ambedkar spent nearly two decades in study and reflection prior to his actual conversion. Following his announcement, religious leaders from nearly every major faith group in India either publically or privately courted Ambedkar and his followers.⁷⁴ In turn, he took a pragmatic approach to his decision: what religion offered the best means for untouchable uplift. Ambedkar, a strict rationalist, was sympathetic to Marx's critique of religion as a potentially pacifying force resistant to social change. His criteria for selection were sociological—the capability of a religious tradition to create a virtuous person wedded to the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity—and ideological—its potential to produce a counter-ideology to supplant caste-Hinduism. He states, 'the purpose of religion was to emphasize, universalize and spiritualize social values and bring them to the mind of the individual who is required to recognize them in all his acts in order that he may function as an approved member of the society.'⁷⁵ Hinduism had failed to cultivate virtuous members of society, and therefore

⁷⁴ This courtship was both evangelical and political. It would be cynical to maintain that there was no religious concerns in seeking outcaste converts, but it would also be naïve to ignore the political benefits that an influx of converts presented to a particular faith group as pre-Independence coalitions were often demarcated by religious confession and dependent upon numbers to secure an audible voice at the table.

⁷⁵ Vasant Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (Bombay: Government of Maharashtra, 1989), V. 403-21.

needed to be replaced.⁷⁶ In Ambedkar's ultimate vision for India, this conversion extended beyond the untouchable communities to include the entire populous.

Buddhism appealed to the practical and nationalistic character of Ambedkar. Of the other religious traditions to which he contemplated conversion, Ambedkar had given considerable thought to Christianity, and his study of its effects upon untouchables who had converted already provided one of the most nuanced assessments of Christian conversion at the time.⁷⁷ Ultimately, he found Indian Christianity to be too apolitical, too susceptible to maintaining caste-based distinctions in both its organizational structuring and its social interactions, and too foreign, especially with its dependence upon extra-Indian missionary support. Ambedkar instead sought an Indian solution to an Indian problem, and Buddhism became his answer.

Born on Indian soil and possessing a reformist agenda and an egalitarian social teaching, Buddhism as conceived by Ambedkar presented a powerful counter-ideology to challenge caste-Hinduism. Historically, it allowed Ambedkar to develop a theory on the origins of caste free from the racial distinctions inherent in the Aryan Invasion Theory. Practically, it supplied a testable and tested system of thought capable of confronting caste-Hinduism. Nationalistically, it supplied an Indian response, and though Ambedkar's Buddhism was thoroughly modern, it lacked the foreignness of both Christianity and Islam.

From at least as early as his time at Columbia, Ambedkar had rejected the 'Aryan Invasion Theory' and the racial bifurcation of Indian society into Adi-Dravidas/Adi-

⁷⁶ In a critique of Upanishadic philosophy Ambedkar writes, "There is no doubt that it turned out to be the most ineffective and inconsequential piece of speculation with no effect on the moral and social order of Hindus." Ibid., III. 86.

⁷⁷ Ambedkar's appeal to Christians—untouchable and caste alike—to become politically active will supply later Dalit Christian theologians with a historical critique of Christianity in India.

Dhams and Aryans that it implied.⁷⁸ His Master's paper in sociology entitled 'Castes in India: Their Mechanisms, Genesis, and Development' was not concerned with the iniquities of the system, including untouchability, but rather with its origins. The two theses of his argument were: first, there was a basic, unified Indian culture, and second, caste did not arise through racial, color, or occupational divisions, but instead through a nationwide endogamy of the Brahman priest caste.⁷⁹ While Phule and subsequent Dalit thinkers used the invasion theory as a revolutionary call for the oppressed peoples of India to rise, revolt, and reclaim their conquered land, Ambedkar rejected the theory realizing already its potential for social stratification and the justification of caste stigmatization. The weapon of the oppressed could just as easily be wielded by the oppressor.

Ambedkar would carry over these two theses into his latter writings on caste. In his 1936 work *The Annihilation of Caste*, he continues to emphasize the cultural and racial unity of India and to orient the question of caste around social divisions. He states:

As a matter of fact the Caste system came into being long after the different races of India had co-mingled in blood and culture. To hold that the distinctions of Caste are really distinctions of race and to treat different Castes as though they were so many different races is a gross perversion of facts... The Brahman of Punjab is racially the same stock as the Chamar of the Punjab, and the Brahman of Madras is the same race as the Pariah of Madras. Caste system does no demarcate racial division. Caste system is a social division of people of the same race.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ For an analysis of Ambedkar's critique of the Aryan Invasion Theory see Arvind Sharma, 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar on the Aryan Invasion.' Here Sharma provides a thorough examination of Ambedkar's linguistic and sociological assessment of the theory in his work *Who were the Shudras?*

⁷⁹ Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 81. Zelliot tentatively proposes—as there is scant documented material either to support or disprove her theory—that the racial segregation that Ambedkar witnessed in the United States alongside the collective political machines of ethnic groups in New York, Irish, Italian and Jewish, led Ambedkar to be wary of race based explanations of caste which would reify touchable/untouchable otherness and to trust in the strength of block politics through which an organized minority could gain political stature.

⁸⁰ B.R. Ambedkar, 'Annihilation of Caste,' in *Writings and Speeches, Vol. I*, 49. Quoted in Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, 247.

In rejecting racial and national differences between caste and outcaste persons, Ambedkar shifted his focus to presenting the social origins of this division. For him, power and the maintenance of power preserve both the invasion theory and the caste system. He states, '[the Brahmin scholar] particularly likes that part of theory which makes the Aryan an invader and a conqueror of non-Aryan native races. For it helps to maintain and justify his overlordship over the non-Brahmins.'⁸¹ The assent to the former justifies the continuance of the latter.

Although his theory on the origination of caste and untouchability differs from Phule, like him, Ambedkar insists upon their artificialness. Despite being codified and conceptualized in a religious framework, they are mere social impositions foisted upon a defeated group of people by a conquering group of people. For Ambedkar, this clash occurred not along racial or ethnic lines, but along religious ones. Caste and untouchability emerge from Brahmanism's defeat of Buddhism. By historicizing their advent in this particular religious confrontation, he is able to re-establish an existing, though at his time nearly non-present, community of dissent that stands counter to Brahmanism. Ambedkar's and his followers' conversion to Buddhism as a religion was also a conversion to Buddhism as a counter-ideology. Caste as a social construct necessitated ideological legitimization, and it found this legitimization in the Hindu religious system. Ambedkar understood Buddhism to be a means for uprooting caste's foundation in religion.

Ambedkar's approach to religion was pragmatic and practical and as such it was very modern. Rather than centering religion on the relationship between God and

⁸¹ Ambedkar, *Who were the Shudras?*, 76. Quoted Sharma, 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Aryan Invasion,' 864.

humanity, Ambedkar based his analysis of religion on intrapersonal relationships. He was greatly influenced by the rationalist turn of the Enlightenment and the credo of the French revolution: liberty, equality, and fraternity. The appeal to revelation cannot justify a religion; its merits rather are to be found solely in its abilities to structure a just and equitable society and fashion its followers likewise. Ambedkar's critique of Hinduism was that it failed on both these fronts. Hinduism legitimized the class and caste system by situating the structuring of society in a divinely ordained ordering of the world. Citing the *Puruṣasūkta* (The Hymn of the Cosmic Person) of the *Rg Veda* as the blueprint for this unjust ordering, Ambedkar states:

The equation of the different classes to different parts of the body is not a matter of accident. It is deliberate. The idea behind this plan seems to be to discover a formula which solves two problems, one fixing the functions of the four classes and the other fixing the gradation of the four classes after a preconceived plan.⁸²

The *Puruṣasūkta* provides the purpose and place of all persons in a cosmically fixed system of inequality sanctified by God. It establishes and maintains an unjust ordering of society, but, as Oliver Herrenschmidt notes, it is 'not imposed by force but is accepted, internalized, by all [Hindus, high-caste to outcaste] because they all share the belief in the sacrality of the books whose knowledge (and writing) are the monopoly of the Brahmins.'⁸³ The class and caste system is no longer an institution violently imposed on persons, but something people passively accept. It is an unquestioned way of looking at society, and it remains unquestioned because it is perceived to be inherent to the nature of the world, of people, and of things. Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism, is not a

⁸² Ambedkar, 'Who were the Shudras?,' *BAWS* (Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department, 1979-1997), VII.32. Quoted in Olivier Herrenschmidt, 'Ambedkar and the Hindu Social Order,' in *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, edited by Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 41.

⁸³ Herrenschmidt, 'Ambedkar and the Hindu Social Order,' 43.

rejection of the religion *in toto*, but the ends of it in particular. He lauds religious reformers like Ramanuja for their efforts to ‘courageously and consistently advocate the cause of equality.’⁸⁴ One reformed-minded theologian espousing justice and equality per millions of indifferent at best and outright oppressive at worst Hindus, does not speak positively to Hinduism ability to become a religion of uplift. For all his praiseworthy teachings, Ramanuja could not enact the change he desired. The Buddha, however, did. Though his mission was all but squelched in India and the descendants of followers yoked under the oppression of caste system, the Buddha and his teachings offered the way to freedom.

Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism was the final act in life dedicated to outcaste liberation.⁸⁵ What he nearly attained in the arena of Indian politics was finally achieved in Nagpur. In Buddhism, Ambedkar found an Indian response to the Indian problem of Brahmanical Hinduism. He found in the Buddha’s *Dhamma* a teaching capable of providing the foundation for a just society free from the prejudices of sexism and casteism, a guide that both his followers and, perhaps one day, all of India could imbibe and live out. And in the process of conversion, Ambedkar found the ultimate means of

⁸⁴ Vasant Moon, ed. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkaranche Bahishkrit Bharat ani Muknayak* (Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, Education Department, 1990), 42. Quoted Yashwant Sumant, ‘Situating Religion in Ambedkar’s Political Discourse,’ in *Reconstructing the World*, 67.

⁸⁵ Christopher Queen helpfully situates Ambedkar’s reconceptualization of Buddhism as being within the field of ‘Engaged Buddhism’ more commonly associated with the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhacht Hahn. Such a positioning helps buttress Ambedkar’s Buddhism from the charge of being either an outright break from the tradition or a modernized refashioning that bears only the minimal of family resemblance. Queen states, ‘[my] conclusion is that Ambedkar’s Dhamma is profoundly Buddhist, because it exemplifies the two great virtues of traditional Buddhism in both its southern and northern versions, namely, moral and mental cultivation. In Theravada parlance, these are *sila* and *samadhi*, conduct and concentration, morality and mindfulness. In the Mahayana tradition, the ‘two great wings of liberation,’ as they are called in the earliest new wisdom text, the *Astasahasrikaprajnaparamita Sutra*, are *prajna* and *karuna* (or *upaya*), wisdom and compassion (or skill-in-means, practical service to others). For Ambedkar, these two principles are translated into and represented by the imperatives of *education* and *science*, on the one hand, and *social ethics* and *political reform*, on the other.’ Christopher Queen, ‘Ambedkar’s Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism,’ in *Reconstructing the World*, 145-6.

transcending class and caste: the complete rejection and negation of the system and ideology upon which they were founded. For Ambedkar, this conversion was an assent to his and his community's inherent dignity realized in the very process of conversion. From that day forward, Ambedkar and his followers would no longer be outcastes, Mahars, but instead Buddhists—a self-chosen identity, consciousness, and way of being. Conversion represented a new moment in the modern Dalit movement, and it opened new horizons and possible paradigms for exploration. The status quo could not only be challenged, but it could be subverted. The efforts of the Dalit *Sahitya* and the Dalit Panthers would build upon Ambedkar's foundation. Buddhist identity would blossom into Dalit identity, and religious conversion would lead to novel ways of thinking about the political, social, and economical means of Dalit liberation. Ambedkar's legacy is now no longer the possession of his contemporaries, but has been transferred to and even wrested by the newest generation of Dalit thinkers and activists. It is they who would carry his standard forward.

Dalit *Sahitya* Movement: Making a Name

With the Republican Party—Ambedkar's political party—beginning to factionalize in the decade following his death, many of the young, educated Dalit students were becoming disillusioned with the empty promises of politicians and the compromises of political deal making. These students comprised the first generation of Mahars to enjoy most fully the fruits of Ambedkar's efforts, and as such most were fiercely loyal to his mission especially the expansion of Mahar and Dalit critical consciousness. This generation also marked the emergence of a nascent Dalit intellectual community which was not only

college educated—remembering that early in his career Ambedkar was the only college graduate amongst the Mumbai Mahar community. Though still very much constrained by casteism, this generation possessed greater economic and social freedom that allowed them to discuss, write, and perform works of Dalit literature. Wishing to realize the critical conscious making of Ambedkar’s mission and for the moment willing to leave the political aspects of the movement in the care of the Republican party, early participants in what would become the Dalit *Sahitya* Movement—‘the Literature of the Oppressed—like Ambedkar, recognized that politics alone would not liberate the untouchables. Rather, true and total liberation required a political revolution wedded to a cultural revolution, one crafted from a counter ideology that challenged caste and celebrated a Dalit, counter aesthetic.

Early participants in Dalit *Sahitya* traced the movement’s origins to several possible founding figures. The recent mass conversion to Buddhism led some writers to identify the Buddha as the originator of the movement as his teachings challenged Brahmanism and a caste based society.⁸⁶ Some, especially the folk poets rooted in the *jalasa* tradition, identified the 14th c. *bhakti sants* Namdev, a *shimpi* ‘tailor,’ and especially his pupil, Chokhamela, a Mahar, as the movement’s founders. The latter’s *abhangs* captured the pain and isolation that accompanied being an outcaste: ‘the agony

⁸⁶ Arjun Dangle presents the common argument for identifying the movement’s origins in one of these figures as being rooted in their shared concern ‘for Dalits and about the injustices meted to them.’ Dangle and other contemporary Dalit intellectuals, whom Gokhale identifies non-pejoratively as the ‘established writers who are employed in white-collar occupations, are part of the middle class, and whose work is reviewed in mainstream literary fora.’ However, he finds this basis insufficient to garner such recognition. Arjun Dangle, ‘Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future,’ in *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Dalit Literature*, ed. Arjun Dangle (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992), 234-266. See also Jayashree Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation: The Politics of an Indian untouchable Community* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1993), 302.

of a devout man who is denied access to the Divine because of his caste.⁸⁷ However, beyond these bards both the mainstream and radical members of the movement have decontextualized and thus de-radicalized Chokhamela and his work. When he is not ignored, he is condemned as ineffectual at best and ‘an enemy’ at worst.⁸⁸

Jyotiba Phule also garners considerable recognition as an originator of Dalit *Sahitya*. Not only do his essays, poems, and plays overtly ‘reject caste, religion and the economic social systems based upon them,’ but he was also an early advocate for the development of an independent *shudratishudra* school of literature.⁸⁹ He writes, ‘the feelings expressed in our meetings and books do not appear in books written by them [high-caste writers] or in their meetings. How will people with their heads in the clouds

⁸⁷ Gokhale defines the *jalasa* tradition as a ‘theatrical performance combining music, drama, and comedy...[it] was a means of educating the Mahar masses in a non-didactic and non-condescending way...[it] was also a means of political communication between the leader and the masses.’ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 97-98. Quote above from *Ibid.*, 302.

⁸⁸ The criticism that Chokhamela and other low caste and outcaste *bhakti* saints are ineffectual arises from the perception that these poets accepted their low caste/outcaste status in society, accepted society’s explanation for their status, and accepted the religious traditions and institutions that made them such. In one of his *abhangs*, Chokha writes, ‘Pure Chokhamela, always chanting the name./I am Mahar without a caste, Nila in a previous birth./He showed disrespect to Krishna; so my birth as a Mahar./Chokha says: this impurity is the fruit of our past.’ From Eleanor Zelliot, ‘Chokhamela and Eknath: Two *Bhakti* Modes of Legitimacy for Modern Change,’ in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, ed. Jayant Lele, (Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1981), 139. However, in Chokha’s poems God often comes to him.

The modern and radical element in Dalit *Sahitya* find this level of acceptance the result of an enslaved psyche unwilling or incapable of rebelling and thus unable to be a true ‘Dalit writer.’ Yeshwant Manohar identifies Chokha amongst, ‘all those gods and believers [who] are my enemies/Those who wrote poems in pretty rhymes to Untouchability/Clearly they are my perfect and absolute Enemies/They who have not let me be free until today.’ Waman Ingle writes, ‘even if Chokha Mela, Bankasena, and others were born in a particular (dalit) caste, we do not call them dalit writers.’ Like Uncle Tom’s, Chokha’s identity hangs in an ambiguous space. For some writers his work represents a courage and boldness to assert his personhood and question his place within an enslaving system; for others his failure to rebel completely against this system automatically disqualifies him from a place of esteem. Both Manohar and Ingle quoted in Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner, ‘*Bhakti or Vidroha: Continuity and Change in Dalit Sahitya*,’ in *Tradition and Modernity in Bhakti Movements*, 34.

⁸⁹ In his essay ‘Dalit Literature is but Human Literature,’ Baburao Bagul, a heralded Dalit author of short stories and an early leader in the movement, pairs Phule with Ambedkar to fashion a literary gauge to assess the kind of hero present in a writer’s works. He writes, ‘writers who have internalized the Hindu value-structure find it impossible to accept heroes, themes and thoughts derived from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar. They possess no ability to express such a life-form...[who] being bitterly opposed to inequality, he naturally fights concepts such as divine personalities, incarnations, or superhuman beings, which originate from social systems based on equality.’ Baburao Bagul, “Dalit Literature is but Human Literature,” in *Poisoned Bread*, 285.

understand what adversities and troubles we have faced?’⁹⁰ However, as a *shudra*, Phule, despite his allegiance to *atishudra* liberation, would not be able plumb the depths of Dalit despair and truly wrestle with the existential angst that accompanied being an untouchable—at least not to the degree befitting the founder of Dalit *Sahitya*.⁹¹ Likewise, despite the progress towards *shudratishudra* liberation that Phule’s undertakings achieved, a progress that laid the foundation for both Ambedkar and Dalit *Sahitya*, he was not able to achieve or provide the emancipation from caste that Ambedkar had in leading the mass conversion to Buddhism.

For the emerging Dalit *intelligencia* as well as the later Dalit *Sahitya* intellectuals, Ambedkar, despite his lack of literary credentials—though he was a noted essayist—is the true founder of the movement. Fearless, fierce, compassionate, educated and enlightened, Ambedkar embodied the ideal of a free Dalit, and the 1956 mass conversion became the paradigmatic event in the quest for freedom.⁹² In this conversion Ambedkar and the Mahar supporters who converted with him seemingly achieved what their predecessors had hoped for: an identity constructed free from the strictures and stigmatization of caste and untouchability. However, though they were now Buddhists and consciously liberated from oppression, the majority of their untouchable brothers and sisters remained trapped in the snare of their untouchability, unawake to their true and free selves, and uncritical of the system that bound them. Ambedkar believed that

⁹⁰ *Mahatma Phule: Samagra Vangmaya*, 300 Quoted in Dangle, ‘Dalit Literature,’ 241

⁹¹ Much like in Dalit theology there is a debate amongst Dalit writers whether one must be a Dalit to produce Dalit literature, which is further complicated by the ongoing debate about who is a Dalit.

⁹² Bagul affirms Ambedkar’s place writing, ‘Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is the mythic giant of Dalit literature. He is the ideal. He is the mythical norm, the embodiment of dalit self-esteem. He is the supreme myth. He is the one who has given deep thought to all these problems; the one who launched agitations to bring them to light.’ Bagul, ‘Dalit literature is Human Literature,’ 287. Yeshwant Manohar adds, ‘Dalit Sahitya has only one origin. That is Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s historic revolution. His life work. His majestic personality.’ Yeshwant Manohar, *Dalit Sahitya: Siddhanth va Swarup*, Nagpur, 1978, 56. Quoted in Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 303.

conversion would bring untouchables out of isolation—from society in general and from low caste and fellow untouchable communities specifically—and would remove their inferiority complex—marked by fatalism, self-denigration, and self-hatred.

As early as 1958, writers such as Bandhumadev were exhorting their fellow literary converts to, ‘spread Dr. Ambedkar’s philosophy to the villages,’ noting that, ‘politics is just one way of attacking the opposition...unless we attack from all sides we cannot defeat those who have inflicted injustice on us for the last thousands of years.’⁹³ From its very beginnings, Dalit *Sahitya* understood itself to be more than a school of literature; it was vehicle to affect change.

The movement’s formula for affecting change remained steadfast to the model developed by Phule and perfected by Ambedkar: equal parts unflinching depiction of Dalit experiences and unwavering commitment to Dalit psycho-social uplift.⁹⁴ Much like its counterpart in the United States, the Black literary and Black Power movements, the aim of Dalit *Sahitya* was the creation of a new aesthetic that challenged not only the literary conventions of the dominant culture, but the entire culture itself.⁹⁵ Its objective was to create a new reality in which untouchables could assert their dignity, their self-worth, their beauty, and their humanity. Autobiographies, short stories, poetry, and plays

⁹³ Bandhumadev, *Prabuddha Bharata* 15.2 (1958) quoted in Dangle, ‘Dalit Literature,’ 242. (This periodical’s title is derived from Ambedkar’s utopic vision of an Enlightened India). The first conference of Dalit writers had been scheduled for December 1956, but Ambedkar’s untimely death pushed the gathering back two years.

⁹⁴ The following is Ambedkar’s charge to writers: ‘Through you literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don’t have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there.’ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Souvenir* (Nagpur: Dalit Sahitya Sammelan, 1976), 8. Quoted in Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, ed. and trans. Alok Muckherjee (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2004), 50.

⁹⁵ For the influence of Black literature upon Dalit literature and a comparison between the two see, Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, especially 82-102 and Janardan Waghmare, ‘Black Literature and Dalit Literature,’ in *Poisoned Bread*, 305-314.

provided the writers with an array of genres to reveal the day-to-day experiences of being an untouchable in India.⁹⁶ They also supplied a broad platform for producing a counter-ideology that contested the traditional social order whose cruel underside had now been exposed. The Dalit *Sahitya* movement proved more than capable in accomplishing the former, but struggled, though always striving, to achieve a clear vision of the latter.

While mainstream Marathi literature began to explore the isolation and angst of the modern, urban, middle class Maharashtran protagonist, Dalit Sahitya pulled back the curtains on life in the rural villages and urban slums.⁹⁷ Writers within the movement

⁹⁶ For whom these revelations were written is an important question. Certainly, in part they were written for a literate middle and upper class high-caste Hindu audience to make known the abhorrent experiences of rural and urban untouchables—a demographic to whom such groups may have limited exposure or of whose conditions they may be willfully or selectively ignorant. However, these stories also serve the Dalit communities themselves as both a literary testament and alarm to the subhuman hardships they and their brothers and sisters have endured and survived, though not all have. The injustices suffered by another can help awaken one to his or her own sufferings—the unrelenting monotony of which deadens one’s will to resist and crushes one’s hope of change presupposing such a will or hope had ever been seriously entertained.

⁹⁷ An example from the rural setting is P. Chendwankar’s poem ‘Patil.’ The poem presents several of the themes common in rural poetry such as the persistence of traditional soci-economic arrangements like the *balutedar* system—manual labor Mahars were required to perform as village servants—and forms of traditional order often upheld by humiliation. Chendwankar writes, ‘The Patil called me/ So I went/ ‘Sit’ he said to me/ But the yard was wet;/ A tattered sack/ He threw at me/ My mouth still shut/ In a cracked cup/ He brought me black brackish water/ Seeing that slime I said/ ‘Thank you, no tear for me;’/ Cracking a chunk of betel nut open/ He said/ ‘Why don’t you join the *tamasha*,/ You Mahar’s son;’/ Scratching his crotch/ The Patil continued his idle chatter/ I stood there wordless/ My shoes still on my feet; I still wonder/ Why I suffered this/ When had that Patil’s ‘Pop’/ Ever fed me!.’ (*Tamasha* is a folk theater often taken its plot from Hindu mythology in which the Mahars often performed as comedians, dancers, musicians, singers, and drummers for the entertainment of the entire village. Following their conversion to Buddhism, many Mahars would no longer perform in traditional *Tamasha*, but rather reconstructed the theater around Ambedkar and related political themes. Erin B. Mee, ‘India: Dalit Theater,’ in *The Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama Volume I*, ed. Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 674. Poem in Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 317.

An example from the urban setting is Marathi dramatist Vijay Tendulkar’s introduction to poet Nameo Dhasal’s *Golpitha* (Golpitha is a red light district in Mumbai where Dhasal grew up). Tendulkar writes, ‘In the calculations of the white collar works, “no man’s land” begins at the border of their world, and it is here that world of Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry of Bombay’s Golpitha begins. This is the world of days of nights; of empty or half-full stomachs; of pain of death; of tomorrow’s worries; of men’s bodies in which shame and sensitivity have been burned out; of overflowing gutters; of a sick young body, knees curled to belly against the cold of death, next to the gutter; of the jobless; of beggars; of pick-pockets; of Bairaga swamis; of Dada bosses and pimps; of Muslim tombs and Christian crosses; of film star Rajesh Khanna and the gods on the peeling wall above the cracking bed; of a hashish cot and a beautiful child asleep on the edge of that cot and a tubercular father employed at a cathouse nearby still cherishing the ambition that his child may become a “sharif,” a gentleman; of hermaphrodites; of home-brew liquor; of

speak of it as almost self-generating and uncontrollable for which the past and present experiences of Dalits fuel the strengthening conflagration. In a collection of writings entitled *Dalit Sahitya: Eka Abhyas*, Arjun Dangle writes, ‘this literature of the Dalits is intimately related to social reality and is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented. The creation of Dalit literature is unavoidable and inevitable until the nature of this harsh social reality changes.’⁹⁸ Making known ‘the nature of this harsh social reality’ remained an integral and a times controversial component of the movement.⁹⁹ Unfiltered scenes of abject poverty haunted the stanzas and lines of their work seemingly supporting the charge leveled by some members of the newly minted Dalit middle-class that Dalit *Sahitya* perpetuated negative stereotypes against the community. These accusations reflected the post-Ambedkar *Zeitgeist* and pointed to the growing schism amongst middle-class Dalits. On the one hand, the less political and less radical elements of the middle-class either favored a more gradualist approach to social change—allowing reservations and education to work at their own pace—or believed that their individual prosperity indicated community prosperity. On the other hand, the more radical members, often the writers and the intellectuals, allied themselves with rural and urban poor and sought immediate change. To the former the latter posed a grave threat in undoing all that

records of philosophical Quwali; and of hot sticky blood running at the price of water at any moment; of steaming tasteless cups of bright red tea; of smuggling; of naked knives; of opium...Dhasal’s Golpitha, where leprosy women are paid the price and fucked on the road, where children cry nearby, where prostitutes waiting for business sing full-throated love songs, from where one cannot run to save his life, or if he runs, he comes back—that Golpitha. Mercy-grace-peace do not touch Golpitha. Dhasal says, here all seasons are pitiless, here all seasons have contrary heart.’ Quoted in, Zelliott, *From untouchable to Dalit*, 277.

⁹⁸ Arjun Dangle ed., *Dalit Sahitya: Eka Abhyas* (Bombay, 1978), quoted in Arjun Dangle “Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future,” 255.

⁹⁹ Nearly twenty years after the movement had begun a sympathetic editorial in the *Times of India* posed the question, ‘Do Dalit writers protest too much?’ The author of the piece continued, ‘It is inevitable for early Dalit literature to have given expression to the torments of an oppressed people. But the note of continued protest and indignations is beginning to pall...and writers should give new direction to the Dalit literature movement. *Times of India*, May 30, 1976, quoted in Zelliott, *From untouchable to Dalit*, 290.

Ambedkar had accomplished by possibly inciting high caste backlash against their uncompromising stance and demands. To the latter the former were ‘Dalit Brahmins’ who wished to abandon their past, pass as high caste members of society, and remain mentally enslaved to the system they believed they had conquered.¹⁰⁰

Making known the atrocities suffered by and perpetuated against the Dalit communities remains the first goal of Dalit *Sahitya*. As Dangle states:

Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature and its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society.¹⁰¹

This acquaintance with caste and untouchability forces high caste Indians to recognize the system and its injustices—no longer can they claim to be ignorant, willfully or otherwise—and educates would-be allies unfamiliar with the particularities of the institution. Importantly, it also requires Dalit communities to face their reality, to be awakened to the systems that oppress them, and to realize that their experiences are neither mandated nor fated. Revealing that there is a problem, that the current systems and structures are unjust, is the critical first step in the construction of a counter ideology. It is the awareness that there is an existing ideology to contest in the first place. Here the second goal of Dalit literature emerges, creating a critical consciousness that can envision a reality alternative to the status quo and encourage whole communities to move towards its realization. Dangle states, ‘Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with

¹⁰⁰ Dangle writes, ‘When one examines the views of these “Dalit Brahmins” who equate the pitiable conditions of dalits with their derogations—in particular their views about society or their means to change the contemporary social system, about revolutionary movements and struggles—one get an idea not only of their middle-class attitude but also of their mental impotence. Dangle, “Dalit Literature: Past, Present, and Future,” 250.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 264-5.

a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people. It is a movement.’¹⁰²

This sentiment is reflected throughout the early analysis and commentary on Dalit literature. At a 1976 Dalit literary conference in Nagpur, Baburao Bagul stated:

Dalit *Sahitya* is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit *Sahitya* is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit *Sahitya* first promotes man’s greatness and man’s freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity...Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit literature. We want literature heroically full of life for the creation of a new society.¹⁰³

That new society seemed so near to being realized. Dalit *Sahitya* went from being performed in public urinals to being required reading in universities and receiving distinguished national and international literary awards. It appeared as if all of India would soon know about the Dalits’ plight and that all the Dalits would possess that critical consciousness to rise up against casteism and untouchability. Unfortunately, the success of Dalit *Sahitya* remained artistic and academic. The new society it envisioned never materialized, and the initial optimism that spurred the movement’s self-perception as dynamic and revolutionary gave way to a weary realism. Five years after his declaration in Nagpur, Bagul, still resolute in the belief that literature and art could effect radical social change, offers an important insight into the cause of the movement’s stagnation. He states:

This stagnation is indicative of the fact that mainstream Dalit literature has been unable to pitch the Dalit literary creation from the mere notion of ‘how they have become Dalits’ to ‘how they can transcend the level of literature by providing fresh cultural resources that would activate at the least urban audience for the counter-hegemonic purposes.’¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Ibid., 266.

¹⁰³ Das, *Indian Dalits*, 118.

¹⁰⁴ Baburao Bagul, *Dalit Sahitya Ajche Kranti Vidnayan* (Nagpur: The Buddhist Publishing House, 1981) quoted in Gopal Guru, ‘The Interface between Ambedkar and the Dalit Cultural Movement in

A successful counter ideology must necessarily be a practical counter ideology. In the dialectical process of revolution, the proposition of an antithesis, a counter ideology, does not ensure the creation of a synthesis, a new thesis, a new society. Dalit *Sahitya* was successful, especially in urban areas, of beginning to instill a critical consciousness within the Dalit psyche. Here it is a true heir to Phule and Ambedkar. However, like Phule and unlike Ambedkar, the movement failed to provide a practical paradigm for bringing about social, political and economical change. Part of this failure was the result of a misplaced trust in the Republican Party to continue the uncompromising agenda of Ambedkar, but part of it was also a naïve hope that the creation of dissatisfaction against the status quo, righteous or otherwise, would lead inevitably to revolution—that when critical consciousness would reach critical mass, mass revolution would surely follow. Perhaps it would, but this critical mass was never achieved as the movement remained urban and middle class never truly penetrating deep into the urban slums or rural villages. For a few of the more politically charged members in the movement the increasing unlikelihood that a spontaneous bottom-up revolution would occur and the even more remote possibility that change would be brought from the top-down meant that the necessary revolutionary instigation had to come from the middle. This would become the position of Dalit Panthers.

Maharashtra,’ in *Dalit Identity and Dalit Politics, Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, Volume 2, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 188-189.

The Dalit Panthers: Taking it to the Streets

In the early 1970's the a group within the Dalit *Sahitya* movement were becoming more radicalized and politicized. A series of economic and agricultural travails struck Maharashtra hard and especially the young Mahars. An economy that had permitted some to attend college and university was suffering now under inflation, unemployment, and work stoppages. Severe famines further increased the region's and the Republican Party's instability. A study at Milind College of Arts revealed that:

Parents of the students who have large families and only one or two grown up and able bodied members in the family who can work on scarcity centers tried to persuade them to give up their college career and help them in supplementing their earning. Out of 683 students, 444 were asked by their parents to give up college and join them on scarcity work.¹⁰⁵

The return to rural Maharashtra for many of these students awoke them to the empty rhetoric of the party and left them questioning its supposed political and socio-economical advancements and the capabilities of a literary/aesthetic movement to precipitate change. Jayashree Gokhale identifies the resulting double radicalization as first, a realization on the part of the students that change could occur only through radical means—the gradualism of the Republican Party provided some cosmetic change, but nothing substantial—and second, a realization on the part of the villagers that such change was possible—the influx of college educated students pointed to an attainable world beyond rural servitude.¹⁰⁶ To the latter the former demonstrated how effective education reform and early conscientization had been; to the former the latter revealed that these reforms and projects were far from complete.

¹⁰⁵M.B. Chitnis and D.D. Kamble, 'Survey of the Impact of Scarcity Conditions on the Students of Milind College of Arts,' *College Annual 1972-73*, 24, quoted in Gokhale, *From Confessions to Confrontation*, 266.

¹⁰⁶Gokhale, *From Confessions to Confrontations*, 266.

With political options narrowing as neither the Republican Party nor the Congress led Indian government seemed capable or willing to remedy the Dalits' plight, the urban teahouse gatherings of Dalit *Sahitya* writers and left-wing activists became the first staging grounds for a new phase of the Maharashtran movement. Reflecting on that era, Arjun Dangle—literary hero and one of the founders of the Dalit Panthers—states, 'We young dalit writers had realized that writing angry poems would not be enough to combat these injustices.'¹⁰⁷ The formation of the Dalit Panthers—so named to show solidarity with the Black Panthers in the United States and other revolutionary groups throughout the world—quickly followed as writers and intellectuals sought to en flesh theory in practice. Until then, despite all its pronouncements on the revolutionary character of Dalit literature, Dalit *Sahitya* remained a revolution on paper only. Certainly Marathi aesthetics had been challenged and *rasa* rules eschewed, but how had the movement practically contributed to the realization of Ambedkar's vision? The Panthers proposed revolution.

¹⁰⁷ Dangle, *Dalit Sahitya*, xxii, quoted in Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontation*, 267.

The 1973 *Dalit Panthers Manifesto* clarifies the group's grievances against the Congress government and the Republican. Against the former the manifesto states, 'The present Congress rule is essential the continuation of the old Hindu feudalism which kept the Dalits deprived of power, wealth and status for thousands of years. Therefore, this Congress rule cannot bring about social change. Under the pressure of the masses it passed many laws but it cannot implement them. Because the entire state machinery is dominated by the feudal interests, the same hands who, for thousands of years, under religious sanctions, controlled all the wealth and power, today own most of the agricultural land, industry, economic resources and all other instruments of power, therefore, in spite of independence and the democratic set-ups the problems of the Dalit remain unsolved. Untouchability has remained intact.' Against the Republican Party it writes, 'Doctor Ambedkar wanted to transfer the then-existing Scheduled Caste Federation [SCF] into a broad-based party. This could not happen during his lifetime. After his death, his "followers" simply renamed SCF as the Republican Party and started to pursue casteist politics. They never united all the Dalits and all the oppressed. Above all, they conducted the politics of a revolutionary community like the Dalits in a legalistic manner. The party got enmeshed in the web of votes, demands, select places for a handful of the Dalits and concessions. So the Dalit population scattered over the country, in many villages, remained politically where they were. The leadership of the party went into the hands of the middle class in the community. Intrigue, selfishness and division became rife. Destroying the revolutionary voice of Doctor Ambedkar, these contemptible leaders made capital out of his name and set up their beggars' bowls...today we have to announce with deep pain that we are no blood relative of Republican Party.' *Dalit Panther Manifesto*, in Barbara R. Joshi, *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement* (London: Zed Books, 1986), 141, 144-45.

The Dalit Panthers were unsurprisingly a profoundly polarizing group. Their meteoric rise and acerbic critique drew harsh criticisms from the Republican Party, with some members calling for their followers to ‘crush the Dalit Panthers wherever they are.’¹⁰⁸ The Panthers responded in kind. Conscious raising was soon to be followed by fist raising as the movement gained popular appeal amongst the Maharashtran disenfranchised Dalit youths.¹⁰⁹ Riots and violence were not uncommon tactics in the more militant factions of the movement. In a nation where the threat of threats and provocations could spark unrest, the rhetoric of the literature became the rhetoric of movement and it was threatening. The *Dalit Manifesto* proclaims, ‘We will not be satisfied easily now. We do not want a little place in the Brahman Alley. We want the rule of the whole land.’¹¹⁰ The Panthers rejected previous movements’ approaches as ineffective. The *Manifesto* adds, ‘legalistic appeals, requests, demands for concession, elections, *satyagraha*—out of these, society will never change.’¹¹¹ In a section of the *Manifesto* entitled ‘Dalit Panther is not a Mere Slogan’ the movement lays out its vision:

The way we look at our questions is the first step to solving them. Panthers will paralyzing attack untouchability, casteism and economic exploitation. This social system and state have taken many a cruel path to convert us into slaves. Turned us long into ‘*shudras*.’ In the present modern forms of slavery there are mental chains of slavishness. We will try to break them. In our struggle we will become free... We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well

¹⁰⁸ ‘Dalit Panthers: Another View,’ 716, quoted in Gokhale, 269.

¹⁰⁹ A report from a subsequent riot identified the base of the movement to be comprised of ‘large numbers of unemployed teenagers, who are drop outs from school, who have no settled daily routine to follow and whose homes are not pleasant places. Time hangs heavily on their hands. The present for them is a vacuum, the future blank...their collective bravado covers their individual sense of ineffectiveness and frustration.’ Unpublished Draft Report of the Committee of the Enquiry into the Worli Riots of January 1974. Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontations*, 269

¹¹⁰ *The Dalit Manifesto*, 146. The literary influence upon the Panthers’ rhetoric can be seen in between the above passage from the *Manifesto* and Namdev Dhasal’s—a founder of the Panthers—comment on Dalit literature, ‘Dalit literature does not want to have a little space in the Brahman Alley or in the literature dominated by Brahman sensibility.’ Quoted in B.D. Phadke, ‘Ambedkar’s Influence on the Marathi Dalit Literature,’ *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: A Centenary Tribute*, ed. A.P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 1991), 54.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

and truly destroy the caste and varna system that thrives on people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberate the Dalits. The present legal system and state have turned all our dreams to dust. To eradicate all the injustice against Dalits, they must themselves become rulers. This the people's democracy. Sympathizers and members of Dalit Panthers, be ready for the final struggle of the Dalits.¹¹²

The rhetoric when enacted through marches, protests, and, at times, physical altercations troubled not only caste-Hindus, but also leaders of other untouchable movements who worried that such acts could result in a caste backlash against Dalits--the movement was at its most prominent during the Emergency. These concerns were further exacerbated by the failure of the Panthers' full vision to trickle down amongst its swelling ranks. Emboldened by numbers, but largely undirected and uninformed, some of the more fringe elements within the movement could say, 'We didn't know what [is] in the manifesto; all we know [is]—if anyone puts his hand on your sister, cut it off!'¹¹³ The Dalit Panthers did not shy away from violence, and perhaps would even support the above sentiment, but their inability to disseminate their full message or produce a developed counter ideology beyond the willingness to use force, stifled the movements chances of achieving long term success.

The limited propagation of the ideology put forth in the *Manifesto* coupled with an ideological schism between the two primary founders of the Panthers—Namdev Dhasal and Raja Dhale—resulted with the movement's ending with a whimper rather than bang. The split centered on questions of Dalit identity and the person of Ambedkar and tapped into the larger intellectual debate between Ambedkarism and communism. For Dhale and his supporters, Ambedkar not only embodied the movement, but also

¹¹² Ibid., 146-7.

¹¹³ Gail Omvedt, 'Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India,' in *Dalit Identity and Dalit Politics*, 143-159.

possessed a kind of supra-human quality. He was no average leader, but a prophet and messiah deserving of the hagiographical honors bestowed upon him. Ambedkar was the ‘defining identity of the movement and an organizing symbol which gave coherence to the history of Untouchables through the Buddhist conversion.’¹¹⁴ Dhasal and his contingent were more hesitant to reduce the movement to Ambedkar and more inclined to embrace the ‘Marxist adage that one man alone does not make history, but rather it is the masses who create their history.’¹¹⁵ For them Ambedkar remained an important and influential figure, but liberation was dependent upon the collective will of the Dalit people to assert their rights and wants.

The split between the two factions originated from how each conceived the Dalit struggle. Was it *varna ladha* (caste struggle) or *varga ladha* (class struggle)? Dhale supported the more socio-religiously oriented caste struggle to which Ambedkarism with its emphasis on Buddhism and conversion seemed especially adept at confronting. Dhale, however, focused on the economically centered class struggle for which the analytical and ideological tools of Marxism best addressed. To him Buddhism interfered with the movement’s expansion by focusing on conversion rather than class based coalition building—conversion to Buddhism had remained primarily a Mahar phenomenon—a sentiment that was common amongst non-Dalit leftists. Dhale sought to unite the Panthers with like-minded movements happening beyond the borders of Maharashtra. Following this initial split in 1974, two years after the Panthers’ founding, subsequent

¹¹⁴ Gokhale, *From Concessions to Confrontations*, 279.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

splintering followed further limiting the movement's effectiveness in implementing any broad ideological overhaul.¹¹⁶

The Dalit Panthers burned hot and fast. The swiftness of their meteoric rise was matched only by the quickness of their demise. As the Republican Party appeared comfortable with compromising and conceding its way to an impotent position within the government, the Dalit Panthers briefly represented the 'no compromise, no sell out' bravado that dared to conceive of an India where one day they would be the rulers of the land. Enveloped by the tamer and longer lasting Dalit *Sahitya* movement, the Dalit Panthers appeared to be the group through which the literary movement's Dalit consciousness raising agenda would be realized radically—in this way its remains difficult to disentangle the Panthers from the literary movement out of which they arose and to which they would return. Although the Panthers failed to incite the Dalit revolution to which they had hoped, their greatest legacy remains an essential contribution to the broader Dalit movements of recent years, the popularization and re-presentation of the word 'dalit.'

While the Dalit Sahitya movement had been utilizing the term for at least a few years prior to the emergence of the Panthers, it was the Panthers through their nationwide headline grabbing actions who carried the term beyond Maharashtra. 'Dalit,' a word that had remained relatively politically dormant for more than century, would come to be the pan-Indian term for these ex-untouchables. Likewise, the Panthers pushed the definition

¹¹⁶ Left leaning political movements seem especially susceptible to these sorts of intellectual debates which often culminate in splintering. To the casual observer such disputes may appear to be more akin to splitting hairs than the serious ideological contests that they are. However, though there is a direct correlation between theory and practice, between stating the problem and implementing a means to correct/counter it, the Dalit Panthers much like many of the caste-class movements far too often fought amongst themselves theoretically rather than their caste-class opponents practically.

beyond its Marathi meaning ‘crushed’—not only a passive adjective, but a negative one at that—and infused it with a revolutionary urgency and agency. Certainly the ‘crushed, broken’ aspect of the term could not be obscured—the broader Maharashtra movement’s impetus has always been liberation from oppression and injustice—but through the Panthers the term made manifest a new freedom. Identities like ex-outcaste or ex-untouchable negated the past, but offered little vision for the future. Dalits consider Gandhi’s preferred term *harijan* paternalistic and condescending not to mention demeaning for those whom the term means also bastards, the children of prostitutes. Ambedkar’s Buddhist, while offering a new identity and counter ideology, remained limited in its demographic range to the Mahars. ‘Dalit,’ however, is a self-appellation, a category that is ‘historically arrived at, sociologically presented and discursively constituted.’¹¹⁷ As Gopal writes:

According to the Panther category Dalit is a revolutionary one for its hermeneutic ability to recover a revolutionary meaning of the historical past of the Dalit people. It also has a greater ability to reach out to the large sections of the people. It is also based on the materialist epistemology as it is not a mere linguistic construction but on the contrary is constructed historically through the revolutionary struggle of the Dalit people. Finally, as the Panthers and Bagul define it, it has the ability to define itself with all the lower castes, tribal people, toiling classes and women.¹¹⁸

Here the term reaches beyond the Mahars of Maharashtra, beyond the ex-untouchables and ex-outcastes throughout India to include all those suffering under the oppressive ‘isms’: casteism, but also sexism and capitalism.

¹¹⁷ Guru, ‘Understanding the Category “Dalit,”’ 65.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 59. According to the Panthers’ *Manifesto* ‘Dalit’ includes, ‘members of Scheduled Castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion,’ in *The Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 145.

Dalit Christian Theology: Taking a Historical Consciousness and a Name to the Church

Although Dalit Christian theology will draw upon sources beyond this particular intellectual and aesthetical tradition, it has thoroughly grafted itself onto this Maharashtran tree. From it, Dalit theology obtains a name, and with that name comes a history, an identity, and an ideology. Perhaps a ‘Sudra Theology,’ an Indian contextual and liberation theology, could have developed independently from Dalit thinking. It would be difficult, however, to imagine such a theology gaining significant traction, let alone initiating a paradigm shift in the way Indian Christian theology would be done for the next three decades. Reflecting on his presentation of ‘Towards a Sudra Theology’ at United Theological College in 1981 and the subsequent emergence of Dalit theology, Nirmal states:

[The address] provoked a great deal of discussion. It was pointed out that the word ‘Sudra’ as well as ‘Harijan’ were resented by those to whom they were applied. I found out that the so-called Sudras preferred to be addressed as dalits. I further discovered that there was already a dalit or Dalit Panther movement for liberation. While still in Bangalore, I hear that in Maharashtra, towards the end of the sixties a new trend in Marathi literature known as the Dalit Sahitya movement had captured the imagination of dalit writers. When I moved to Pune in 1981, I decided to study this movement closely...Some of the leading universities in Maharashtra had by now started offering special courses in dalit literature. Dalit Sahitya movement was part of the total dalit movement aimed towards liberation through social change. Dalit literature, was considered as an instrument in social change. It is this background which gave me new direction for my own theological task.¹¹⁹

Nirmal’s discovery of the already flourishing modern Maharashtran Dalit Movement, opened his and other theologians eyes to the liberative potency in doing theology alongside the movement’s sociology, philosophy, and aesthetics. Just as Dalit Sahitya challenged and eschewed the accepted norms of Marathi and Indian literature,

¹¹⁹ Nirmal, ‘A Dialogue with Dalit Literature,’ 66.

Dalit theology would confront the presuppositions and prejudices of traditional Indian Christian theology. The subject of theology would shift to Dalits and Dalit experience, the methodology would move towards Dalit liberation, and the object of this theology would be coming to know a God who affirmed Dalit peoples' dignity and opposed caste hierarchy and oppression. Dalit theology is the Christian theological appropriation—sometimes critical, sometimes uncritical—of the Maharashtran movement. Its development and its trajectory, its successes and its failures, are indebted substantially to this stream of counter-cultural and counter-ideological thought birthed by Phule, come-to-age under Ambedkar, promulgated by Dalit *Sahitya*, and radicalized by the Dalit Panthers. There would be no Dalit theology without these figures and associations. There would be no Dalit theology in name, and there would be a Dalit theology in content or substance. Here we find the 'Dalitness' of Dalit theology.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a historical survey of Dalit theology's first years. The emergence of liberation and contextual theologies across the globe inspired within Indian Christian theology a reflective turn that examined the plight of India's many poor. As this inquiry developed a few theologians like A. P. Nirmal and K. Wilson questioned whether an Indian liberation theology could adequately address the particularities of the Indian context, which is marked by both poverty and caste oppression. As a response to this doubly oppressive context, Nirmal first presented a paper titled 'Towards a Christian Shudra Theology,' which would ground theological inquiry in the experiences of low-caste and out-caste persons. Soon thereafter, having learned about and engaged with the

Dalit movement arising out of Maharashtra, Nirmal and his colleagues began to work towards a 'Christian Dalit theology.' Over the next decade through small conferences and larger symposiums a new theology emerged within the Indian seminaries. Today that theology has just entered its fourth decade.

The second half of this chapter examined the modern Maharashtran Dalit Movement, and traced its development through four stages: the agitations of Jotiba Phule, the leadership of B. R. Ambedkar, the creativity of Dalit *Sahitya*, and the politically-charged protests of the Dalit Panthers. While Dalit theology acknowledges its indebtedness to these figures and organizations, a presentation of them in relation to Dalit theology had yet been undertaken. More than just a name, Dalit theology appropriated many concepts that would become central to its articulation like identity affirmation, conscientization, a social vision, and the necessity of a counter-ideology/theology. The chapter concluded with the recognition that there would no Dalit theology without its discovery of the modern Maharashtran Dalit Movement. However, alongside the many of the positive fruits it reaped from this discovery, it has also has accepted without much initial critical reflection some of the movement's own limiting factors—an essentialized understanding 'Hinduism' and 'Brahmanism,' an underdeveloped social vision, and a methodological exclusivism that makes the formation of liberative partnerships difficulty. The next chapter will examine Dalit Christian theology's Christian aspect, and will show how these appropriations positive and problematic, take shape in its theological articulation.

Chapter Two

Dalit Christian Theology and Pathos: The Painful Need for a Pain-filled Theology

Introduction

As the preceding chapter focused upon the ‘Dalit’ of Dalit Christian theology, this chapter will examine its ‘Christian’ dimension. The chapter begins not with its beginning, but instead with a brief survey of the state of Dalit theology today. While acknowledging that much has been accomplished over the last three decades, many of Dalit theology’s liberative aspirations remain unrealized. To understand why this is the case, this chapter presents its theological development up through today with special attention paid to the place pathos holds in its theological articulation and reflection. It will include both the pioneering first-generation and this current second-generation who raise important and critical questions concerning Dalit theology’s method and content.

The chapter follows a similar structure as that of the previous one as it traces the rise of Dalit Christian theology. This history begins with the mass conversion phenomenon that occurred the mid and late 19th c. that saw a marked demographic shift within Indian Christianity in which rural, low-caste/outcaste persons became the majority in the Church. Occurring alongside these conversions was process of theological inculturation that worked to present and re-present Christianity in the Indian context. Influential figures like Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and A.J. Appasamy helped to establish this particular and increasingly prominent mode of theological inquiry. As seen in the last chapter, Dalit theology understands itself to be a corrective response to these

‘traditional’ modes of Indian Christian theology by grounding itself in the particular experiences of Dalit communities who now constitute the demographic majority.

During its development, Dalit theology began to especially emphasize a particular dimension of Dalit experience: pathos. The suffering pain that accompanied caste oppression/stigmatization and economic exploitation became the primary lens through which Dalit theology reflected. In this section of the chapter, I examine the ways in which pathos directed the trajectory of Dalit theology positively and problematically. Central to this reflection were the Deuteronomic Creed and the Suffering servant paradigm. Positively, the former served to establish the importance of Dalit historical consciousness and the formation of a critical consciousness, and the latter offered the basis for presenting, affirming, and valorizing Dalit identity. The chapter concludes by questioning the primacy placed upon pathos, and pointing the way towards a comparative theological reflection on Dalit service and Swami Vivekananda’s Practical Vedanta and his understanding of *sevā*.

Looking Back and Looking Ahead

Just having entered into its fourth decade, Dalit Christian theology is now transitioning from an emerging theology to an established one. Its first generation of theologians worked hard to justify the necessity of such a theological endeavor and to lay down the movement’s foundations. In challenging the Indian Christian theology of its day, Dalit theology had to demonstrate why the current methodologies failed to ‘be really relevant to the living situations of the majority of Indian Christians.’¹ In seeking to provide a legitimate counter-theology to India Christian theology, Dalit theology had to prove that

¹ James Massey, ‘Ingredients for a Dalit Theology,’ in Nirmal, *Towards a Dalit Theology*, 58.

it could supply the means to offer a pertinent theology ‘containing good news for the Dalits.’² A new theology centering on a new subject necessitated a new methodology. The first generation of Dalit theologians established this method; the present second generation of theologians is now affirming, critiquing, correcting, and expanding upon it.

In his opening essay for the journal *Jeevadhara*’s January 2011 issue, which was dedicated to examining the present state of Dalit theology and Dalit Christians in the Indian church, S. Lourdusamy—the former secretary of the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe Commission (SC/STC) of the Catholics’ Bishop Conference of India (CBCI)—poses the question ‘Has anything changed?.’³ He continues:

One may ask whether there has been any change in the relationship of the Church to Dalit Liberation? But my question is [a] more basic one: Has there been really any relationship at all? I see a lot of conflicts between hierarchy and laity and upper caste and Dalit Christians and upper caste people and Dalit people. Polarization and hatred seem to fill the horizons.⁴

Second generation Dalit theologian Peniel Rajkumar offers a similar take on the question. He states:

The persistence of caste discrimination within the Indian Church is a well-documented issue. In such a context we need to ask whether Dalit theology has offered an ethical framework to evaluate the foundations on which caste-based discrimination is validated and perpetuated. Though one cannot make Dalit theology entirely responsible for the slow progress with regard to Dalit emancipation, one should not refrain from critically evaluating the pertinence of Dalit theology in enabling a change in Christian attitude towards the caste-based discrimination.⁵

If removed from their contexts, both the quotes from Lourdusamy and Rajkumar would seem to suggest that in thirty plus years Dalit theology has had a marginal impact at best on the Indian Christian church. Caste discrimination remains and malformed,

² James Massey, *The Dalit Christians*, 292.

³ S. Lourdusamy, ‘Dalit Christians: *Has Anything Changed?*,’ *Jeevadhara* 241 (2011): 7-13.

⁴ Ibid., 7-8.

⁵ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 59.

uneasy relationships persist between high caste and Dalit Christians. Have hundreds of books, articles, papers, and presentations been for naught? Have dozens of conferences convened in vain? Has the establishment of Dalit theology centers and programs yielded no fruit? Have Dalit theology courses, curricula, and leadership training in Indian seminaries molded priests and pastors incapable of applying and adapting their education to their churches and congregations? What has changed in three decades?

That Dalit theologians can even pose these types of questions reveals the most fundamental changes affected by Dalit theology. First, there is the very existence of the field of Dalit theology and a group of persons self-identified as Dalit theologians. Prior to the emergence of Dalit theology there was no sustained theological focus on the Dalit plight and no place within the Indian church, let alone an entire discipline, dedicated to doing theology for and from these particular communities' context. Second, to admit the shortcomings of Dalit theology is to demonstrate an awareness of the Dalit situation and the formation of a critical consciousness. A second-generation naiveté regarding the fruits of Dalit theology would be of little use. Third, to perceive these inadequacies is to realize that what Dalit theology had hoped to achieve by now has not yet been achieved. The important presupposition here is that Dalit theology in fact can enact social, economic, political, and religious change. Fourth and finally, change requires a goal and a vision. Though the hopes and aspirations of the Dalit community have not come to full fruition, they have been hoped and aspired for. These are dreams dreamed and dreams not ready to be deferred. The emotional, psychological, and theological character of the outcaste Christian communities—now Dalit Christian communities—thirty years after the founding of Dalit theology stands in stark contrast to those preceding decades. Dalit

theology ought not lose sight of what has been accomplished, but it should maintain a critical eye in seeing all that remains to be done. The question why change has not been more obvious is a very important one and a very Dalit question that must be asked. In answering this question, a second arises: How might Dalit theology proceed? This chapter will answer the former; this project will seek to discern the latter.

A New Way of Doing Indian Christian Theology

The Mass Movement of Dalit Conversion

In the last half of the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th, the Indian Christian churches experienced a large influx of Dalit converts. The phenomenon of these mass movements, as Webster calls them, left missionaries cautiously welcoming and somewhat puzzled.⁶ The scale of conversion during this era was both unprecedented and, for the missionaries, problematically unpredictable from town to town and region to region. The Punjab region was one such area that experienced a dramatic increase in the Christian population during this era. The census data from 1881 show that there were 3,912 Indian Christian present in the region. In the census taking fifty years later, that number increased to 395,629.⁷ The majority of these converts came from the Chuhra, a Dalit community with the traditional occupation of being sweepers. Similarly, the surrounding area of Ongole, Andhra Pradesh witnessed its own mass movement. In January 1867, the Baptist minister John Clough, preceded by his envoy of Telegu preachers, came to the town of Tallakondapaud situated fifty miles southwest of Ongole. Teaching and

⁶ Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 40.

⁷ Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 48. For a short, narrative history of the Chuhra mass movement and the initial hesitancy of the United Presbyterians see James Massey, 'Dalit Roots of Indian Christianity,' in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Delhi: ISPCK, 2008).

preaching over the course of five days, Clough baptized 28 persons from the Madiga community whose traditional occupations included leather working and agricultural labor.⁸ By 1870 that number had grown to 1,103, and by 1876 to 3,000. In 1912 the American Baptist church in the area had reached a total of 61,687 converts.⁹

Despite these astounding numbers, the mass movement phenomenon was not pan-Indian. Whereas Tamilnadu, Kerala, and Pondicherry witnessed conversions on a smaller scale, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Maharashtra remained largely unaffected. Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh all saw similar mass movements, but these were amongst Tribal communities rather than Dalits.¹⁰ Although limited in geographic scope, the mass movements had a significant impact on the Indian Church's demographics. In sixty years the Indian Christian population more than quadrupled in size from 1.25 million to just over 6 million far outpacing the Indian populations growth of 71%.¹¹ Alongside this growth came a shift in Christian locus away from urban centers and into the rural countryside. Whereas prior to the mass movements the Christian communities were comprised of metropolitan, educated persons, after them Christianity became

⁸ Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 51.

⁹ Ibid., 52, 56. This number is based on the total number of baptized members in the church. Like other missionaries groups, the American Baptist Telegu Mission did not baptize all the individuals that came to them seeking conversion. Here we see a formal definition of conversion understood as being baptized members of the church in which the criteria for baptism had to be met to the satisfaction of the particular Missions. The discernment of conversion remained the purview of the Mission societies, which found the instances of mass movement conversion overwhelming at times. One such instance in Clough's ministry coincided with an outbreak of famine in Andhra in 1876-8. Clough offered medical and financial assistance and organized a government relief program directed towards the Madiga community and supervised by Madiga Christian converts. While worship and preaching were prominent in the work camps and many sought conversion, Clough was hesitant to administer baptisms both during and after the famine. Baptism remained reserved to those that could most demonstrate a conversion of spirit independent from the material benefits of the Mission. Ultimately, intra-Christian concerns led to his change of heart. In June 1878 two Catholic priests told Clough that if he would not offer baptism to those requesting it, they most certainly would. That June saw 1,168 baptisms, a number that was surpassed in single day the following month. These incidents of baptism reveal both the explosiveness of the mass movement phenomenon as well as the intra-religious rivalry that was present throughout the Indian mission field.

¹⁰ Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 49-50.

¹¹ Ibid., 72.

concentrated in rural areas consisting of predominantly poor, illiterate Dalit communities.¹² The face of Indian Christianity had changed considerably.

As missionaries and mission societies tried to understand the theological and sociological reasons behind mass movements, they remained perplexed by the seemingly arbitrariness of the phenomenon. Henry Whitehead, an early twentieth century missionary to South India, states, “‘The Spirit bloweth where it listeth.’ We hear the sound and can see the results, but we cannot tell whence it is likely to come and whither it is likely to go.”¹³ While missionaries were wanting for explanations why certain Dalit communities converted en masse and others did not, they were able to suggest motivations for why those who converted did. The South Indian Missionary Conference that convened in 1900 proposed five reasons that were ‘most immediate and operative.’¹⁴ These were: ‘the conviction that Christianity is the true religion; a desire for protection from oppressors, and, if possible material aide; the desire for education; the knowledge that those who have become Christians had improved “both in character and condition;” and the influence of Christian relatives.’¹⁵

Some missionaries and Indian critics of Christian conversion understood the sentiment behind the Conference’s placement of ‘the conviction that Christianity is the true religion’ at the top of its list as being either wishful thinking or naiveté. For both

¹² Ibid., 72. Webster further notes that following the 1931 census, five of six Christians now lived outside of cities.

¹³ Henry Whitehead, ‘The Progress of Christianity in India and Mission Strategy,’ *The East and the West*, V (January 1907), 23. Quoted in Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 64. Preceding this scriptural quote from John 3:8, Hyde states that ‘no doubt there are subtle causes which account for the fact that apparently similar conditions produce such different results in different parts of India, but it is not easy to predict *a priori* the exact course which the progress of Christianity will follow in the future.’ Whitehead and other observant missionaries realized that there had to be something that differentiated one context from the next, but they had difficulty in locating it on the surface level. This something had to be subtle and just beyond the inference of the missionaries, and ultimately relates to Dalit agency, both individual and communal.

¹⁴ *Report of the South Indian Missionary Conference held at Madras, January 2-5, 1900*, 44-45. Quoted in Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 63.

¹⁵ Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 63.

these camps the supposed material benefits inherent in conversion superseded any secondary spiritual benefits. W.B. Hyde, a contemporary of Whitehead, writes:

It ought to be frankly recognized that it may be towards the Motherhood of the Church rather than towards the Fatherhood of the Savior from sin that the faces of the pariahs and aboriginal races of India are slowly being turned. They may be seeking baptism, for the most part, not from a desire to have their lives and consciences cleansed from sin and to enter the eternal life of God, but because the Church presents itself to them as a refuge from oppression, and as a power that fosters hope and makes for betterment.¹⁶

The sheer number of converts would seem to suggest that factors other than a sound grasp of late 19th/early 20th c. Christian soteriology would be the primary motivating force behind conversion. This very well may be the case, but this conclusion is susceptible to being misconstrued by an easy and false dualism between the soul and the body. Whitehead's final clause, 'a power that fosters hope and makes for betterment,' which he positions in the non-theological category, better captures the main impetus for conversion and is best understood as bridging this dichotomy. For those persons and communities that did convert, Christianity was the true religion in which religion is not understood solely as orthodoxy, but also orthopraxy. For those who did not convert, whether it be for theological or practical reasons, Christianity did not meet their expectations or needs—spiritually and/or materially. Certainly, a conversion centered solely upon material benefit would be a conversion in name only, but the fact that many Dalits did not convert when presented with similar possibilities of material improvement suggests that other factors were at play. Psycho-spiritual uplift, the focus of both the modern Dalit movement and Dalit Christian theology, may be one possible way of understanding conversion that balances the theological and the practical.

¹⁶ H.B. Hyde, 'South Indian Missions: The Present Opportunity,' *The East and the West*, VI, (January 1908), 78. Quoted in Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 63-64.

The mass movements reveal the important role that Dalit agency—individual and communal—contributed in the process. Like Ambedkar’s later conversion to Buddhism, these conversions to Christianity should be understood as a process of affirmation and negation—a conversion to and a conversion from. In affirming one’s new Christian identity one was also negating a previous identity. Christianity provided some Dalits with a new way of understanding themselves independent from social or Hindu religious identities. It offered a way of being that was no longer moored in the caste system. For these modes of understanding and being to be realized, however, was something that missionaries could not bring about themselves. They could present the possibilities, demonstrate their worth, and promise their fulfillment, but the choice to convert or not to convert—the trusting and testing of Christianity—could only be made by Dalits themselves. Undergoing conversion was the initial step in shifting identity from being a subjugated person to being the subject/author of one’s own destiny.¹⁷

Although some Dalits enjoyed the immediate positive impact of conversion, many more found themselves in a precarious position. Those that found authentic liberation from the caste system now had to learn to live apart from it.¹⁸ Conversion often split *jati*

¹⁷ Chad Bauman explores the sociological and theological considerations at work in conversion in his historical case study of the *Chamar/Satnami* community living in present day Chhattisgarh. He notes that ‘for some [*Satnamis*], the search ended in Christianity and in this context conversion to Christianity cannot therefore be reduced to the result of economic and political concerns alone, though these undoubtedly played important roles. Rather, some Chhattisgarhis embraced Christianity because of what Max Weber would have called ‘ideal’ interests, because it embodied a compelling vision of the ‘good life,’ a vision that involved both indigenous values and values imported by the missionaries.’ Although Bauman is hesitant to refer to converts as ‘free’ agents, owing to the numerous social, economic, and political construction that impact and limit autonomy, he does highlight the agency of converts to choose and reshape Christianity and the converts’ ability to ‘act in their own interests to the extent that circumstances allowed.’ Chad Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868-1947* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2008), 17.

¹⁸ As a construct that touched upon nearly all aspects of society, the caste system provided one’s place, occupation, and duties. It created stability, often fixed and often oppressive, but stability nonetheless. Conversion disrupted this stability. One’s place in society required renegotiation and re-conception through a language and a thought-system that remained independent from traditional ways of knowing and being in

communities apart, and the once relied upon social and economic support of community could not always be called upon for help.¹⁹ Some converts abandoned their traditional occupations and thus had to find new kinds of work. For others who remained in their occupations, they now faced boycotts from high-caste groups and interference from members of their former *jati*.²⁰ A great many Dalit converts did not find the liberation from caste they hoped for and were promised. Despite the missionaries' proclamation that caste had no place within the Christian community, an assumption based upon an understanding of caste as being a particularly Hindu religious phenomenon, Dalit converts encountered caste oppression within the Church. Baptism and being born-again in the Christian community did not always wash away the stigma of being an outcaste born of a low birth.

The mass movements changed the demographics of the Indian Christian church markedly. Within sixty years it shifted from being an urban, mixed higher-caste community to being predominantly rural and majority Dalit. As the leadership passed from the missionary societies to mainline Indian ecclesial institutions, Dalit Christians found themselves on the outside looking in. Despite comprising the largest base of the

the world. This new identity presented opportunities for liberation that the old one could not provide, but the transformative process would not be easy existentially or practically.

¹⁹ Webster notes that while Dalit communities were less likely to excommunicate members who converted to Christianity, they did expect participation in communal practices religious or otherwise. Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 83. Dalit converts now found themselves in a liminal space between two communities—their church and their *jati*—that demanded their loyalty often in competing ways as was especially the case in the religious-communal matters. Missionaries viewed Dalit participation in traditional religious practices as evidence of backsliding into old, idolatrous ways. Likewise, non-Christian Dalits understood the converts' failure to partake in these community forming and sustaining rituals as a rejection of the community.

²⁰ John Clough offers one example of this organized program of displacement. 'The village washermen were told not to work for [the Madiga converts]; the potter was told not to sell pots to them; their cattle were driven from the common grazing ground; the Sudras combined in a refusal to give them the usual work of sewing sandals and harness; at harvest they were not allowed to help and lost their portion of grain.' John E. Clough, *Social Christianity in the Orient: The Story of a Man, a Mission, and a Movement* (New York: 1914), 171-172. In Webster, *Dalit Christians*, 78.

Church, Dalits had little input in its direction, structuring, and theology. A half-century more would pass before their particular context would become a focal point for Indian Christian theology and the Indian Christian Church.²¹

The Rise of (Traditional) Indian Christian Theology

The development of an Indian Christian theology emerged alongside but remained independent of the mass movements phenomenon. Efforts to articulate the Christian faith in an inculturated and indigenized manner had begun already in the 16th and 17th cs. with missionaries like Thomas Stephens, S.J. and Roberto DeNobili, S.J. Their efforts to make Christianity both intelligible and commendable to Hindus necessitated keen skills in translating key terms and concepts into Sanskrit and Indian vernaculars. The Hindu traditions they encountered possessed a rich history of mythology and philosophy, a robust tradition of apologetics and polemics, and a host of priests and poets trained and prepared to engage in spirited theological debate. The Christian faith would have to appeal to both the heart and mind of would-be Hindu converts. While these and other like-minded missionaries sowed the seeds of inculturation and indigenization—with translation being a beginning and crucial step in the process—an Indian Christian theology produced by Indian theologians would only begin to take root in the mid-19th c.

Indian Christian theology's development paralleled the growing national movement on the subcontinent. Recent converts and those sympathetic to the Christian faith sought to distinguish Christianity from European missions and its colonial trappings.

²¹ Although the mainline churches—the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches of North and South India—did not do theology from the Dalit context, Dalit communities had been engaged in theology, a living rather than an academic theology, throughout this interstitial period. A major contribution of second-generation Dalit theologians has been recovering the kinds of theology Dalit communities engaged in during this period.

Individuals like Keshabchandra Sen (1838-1884), Brahmanandhab Upadhyaya (1861-1907), and A.J. Appasamy (1891-1975) argued that in order for Christianity to gain traction it had to demonstrate both its independence from Europe and its relationship—familial, coherence, and/or superiority—to Hinduism and other established faiths in India. Christianity had to become Indian, and the clearest path to this transformation would involve a reworking of the faith in light of and in conversation with traditional Indian religions. Appropriation rather than outright refutation became the common practice of these early Indian Christian theologians.²²

While never joining a Christian church, Sen, a leader in the Brahmo Samaj reform movement, remained sympathetic to Christianity and called for a more inculturated presentation of it and the Gospel message. Following Rammohan Roy's repudiation of Eurocentric presentations of Christianity and Jesus, Sen emphasized the original Asiatic nature of the religion and Jesus. He states:

Behold, Christ cometh to us as an Asiatic...and he demands your heart's affection...He comes to fulfill and perfect that religion of communion for which India has been panting...For Christ is a true Yogi, and he will help us realize our national ideal of a Yogi.²³

Sen's approach to inculturation was nationalistic, apologetic, and reformist.

Identifying Christ as a true Yogi, he asserts that a Europeanized understanding of Christ obfuscates his true Asian and even Indian nature. Likewise, Christ as the ideal of a yogi

²² As Indian Christian theology distanced itself temporally and ideologically from the reform movements of the Bengali Renaissance it became more appreciative of Hinduism's possible philosophical and theological contributions to its project. Later Indian Christian theologians engaged Hinduism devotional's and ethical dimensions more explicitly than the philosophically distilled Hinduism of the Renaissance. Roy and Sen remained untethered to a tradition—Hindu or Christian—whereas converts like Upadhyaya and Appasamy in their Christian rootedness explored more openly Hinduism's contributions to Indian Christian theology.

²³ Keshub Chunder Sen, *Lecture in India*, I.338-339, 1904. Quoted in Robin Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Church: The Cultural Context of the Gospel* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1974), 20.

challenges Hindu understandings of the yogi, rendering them incomplete and unfulfilled apart from Jesus' example. In this simple construction, Sen undercuts both the missionaries' and Hindus' claims to possess the correct conceptions of who Jesus and a yogi truly are respectively. This method will be repeated again in his treatment of Trinity through the Hindu understanding of *Brahman* as *sat* (being), *cit* (thought/consciousness), and *ananda* (joy). Whereas the theology of Swami Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux 1910-1973) allows for a deeper exchange and reflection upon the Trinity and *saccidānanda* in which his understanding and experience of the Trinity is transformed through this interreligious encounter, Sen's treatment is a transposition rather than a translation or exchange. *Sat* is more correctly understood as God, *cit* as Logos, and *ananda* as the love of the Holy Spirit. In Sen there is a process of inculturation taking place, but in later thinkers this method will become more theological than ideological.

In his classification of early Indian Christian theologians, Robin Boyd categorizes these theologians by their location within Hinduism's *marga* system: *jnana marga* (way of knowledge), *bhakti marga* (way of devotion), and *karma marga* (way of action).²⁴ It is a useful means for highlighting the diversity in the approaches and the thinkers individual Indian Christian theologians called upon to inculturate Christianity. Rather than presenting Indian Christian theology as an appropriation of some generalized and abstract conception of 'Hinduism,' Boyd demonstrates the subtlety of their projects. Just as Augustine and Aquinas did not utilize Hellenistic thought in the general but instead in the particular—Plato and Plotinus for Augustine and Aristotle for Aquinas—Upadhyaya and Appasamy engage Hinduism in the particular. As pioneers in the field of Indian Christian

²⁴ Robin Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity; An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1975).

theology both figures chart trajectories and establish interlocutors that will define the movement for subsequent generations.

Upadhyaya, once a student of Sen, continued the process of inculturation with a greater theological accent. A Brahmin born, Anglican baptized, Catholic convert, Upadhyaya was in the words of Rabindranath Tagore ‘a Roman Catholic ascetic yet a Vedantin—spirited, fearless, self-denying, learned, and uncommonly influential.’²⁵ He was a Hindu-Catholic seeking to maintain the tension between his cultural heritage and his religious faith. In an essay for his monthly journal *Sophia*, Upadhyaya describes the nature of this identity. He states, ‘We are Hindus so far as our physical and mental constitution is concerned, but in regard to our immortal souls we are Catholic.’²⁶ For Upadhyaya ‘Hindu’ constituted a culturally constructed way of thinking—‘more speculative than practical, more given to synthesis than analysis, more contemplative than active’—and living—‘in observing caste...in eating and drinking.’²⁷ Upadhyaya de-contextualized and essentialized the Catholic pole of this identity limiting its place to the supernatural truths of faith made known by revelation. To be Hindu was not antithetical to being Catholic, but rather a particular way of being Catholic.

A follower of Aquinas, Upadhyaya believed that just as Aristotelian thought underpinned Aquinas’ theology, Śāṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta could provide the philosophical foundation for a truly Indian Christian theology. Upadhyaya viewed Hindu philosophy as an apex of natural human reasoning en par if not surpassing Greek philosophy. As such it was a *preparatio evangelica*, leading people to the limits of

²⁵ Quoted in Julius J. Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), xv.

²⁶ Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, ‘Are we Hindus?’, *Sophia*, July 1898. Quoted in Lipner, 209. Upadhyaya created *Sophia* for an educated Hindu audience.

²⁷ Ibid.

natural reasoning and preparing them for the supernatural truth of Christian faith. He states:

All doctrines of Christ, the Holy Trinity, the Atonement, the Resurrection, from the beginning to the end, are beyond the domain of reason...the truths in Hinduism are of pure reason illuminated in the order of nature by the light of the Holy Spirit. They do not overstep reason...but though the religion of Christ is beyond the grasp of nature and reason, still its foundation rests upon the truths of nature and reason. Destroy the religion of nature and reason, you destroy the supernatural religion of Christ.²⁸

Upadhyaya fused aspects of Śāṅkara's Advaita Vedānta with the neo-Thomism of his day. His project was doubly apologetic. In appropriating Śāṅkara for his philosophical base and Hindu Sanskritic terminology for his spiritual and devotional writings, Upadhyaya sought to make Christianity more appealing and less foreign to his educated Hindu audience. In justifying this project through Aquinas and developing it through the lens of neo-Thomism he hoped to demonstrate the acceptability and suitability of Hindu philosophy and theism to Church authorities. His reliance upon neo-Thomism, however, resulted in a work that was more reconstructive than constructive. Aquinas and his interpreters had already laid the Christian theological framework, a framework dependent upon Aristotelian thought for its articulation. Rather than starting with Advaita and then constructing a Christian theology, Upadhyaya possesses already the Christian framework to which Advaita can and must be made to fit. The replacement of Aristotle with Śāṅkara is then more of a cosmetic change for him than a substantive one.

Upadhyaya's approach to the Trinity through the concept of *sacchidananda* is both more confessionally centered and theologically robust than Sen's. His grounding the project in the split between the Hindu/natural order and Catholic/supernatural order,

²⁸ Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, 'Our Attitude Towards Hinduism,' *Sophia*, 1895. Quoted in Lipner, 128.

however, ultimately reduces Hinduism to natural philosophy. It is a pinnacle of human reasoning and most appropriate for the Indian context, but Hinduism is brought fully to completion and comprehension only in Catholic revelation. This recognition is not a critique of Upadhyaya, but is made to properly understand his contribution to Indian Christian theology. As an individual trying to maintain and make sense of two identities and working to convince two distinct groups of the merits of the other's thinking, Upadhyaya sides with the cultural significance of Hinduism and the theological import of Catholicism.

While Upadhyaya encountered Hinduism through the way of knowledge, Appasamy approached it through the way of devotion. Born into a Shaivite convert family in Tamilnadu, Appasamy admired greatly the Hindu theological and devotional poetry of his home state. With a theological rather than philosophical appreciation for Hinduism, Appasamy calls inculturation necessary, stating, 'If Jesus blames his contemporaries for not listening to the voice of Moses, with equal power and vehemence will He condemn us for not listening to Ramanuja, Manikkavacakar, Tukaram, and Chaitanya, who have left behind them teaching of such underlying value, pointing the way to Christ.'²⁹ He still operates under a fulfillment model, but he understands Hinduism to be a religion of revelation en par with Judaism.

Appasamy found Ramanuja to be a more appropriate interlocutor with Christianity than he did Śaṅkara. Passionate, love-filled devotion rather than dispassionate knowledge would be the key to inculturating Christianity. In Ramanuja's thinking, he discovered a theology framework especially suitable for Christianity.

²⁹ A.J. Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga*, (Madras: CLS, 1930), 165-166. Quoted in Israel Selvanayagam, 'Water of Life and Indian Cups: Protest Attempts at Theologizing in India,' in Sebastian C.H. Kim ed., *Christian Theology in Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 49.

Ramanuja's Viśiṣṭādvaita (qualified-non dualism) presented him with a philosophical-theology in which God out of compassion for his devotees makes God's self available to them. Whereas Advaitic thought locates God within this world of conventional/relative reality and identifies Brahman alone as the ultimate reality, Viśiṣṭādvaitic thought affirms the realness of God and this world. Appasamy defines *bhakti* as, 'personal faith in a personal God, love for him as for a human being, the dedication of everything to his service, and the attainment of *mokṣa* (final bliss) by this means rather than by knowledge, or sacrifice or works.'³⁰

Appasamy's re-centering of Johannine Christology from, 'I and the Father are one,' (Jn 10:30) to the farewell discourses in John 13-17—focusing on the phrase 'abide in me and I in you'—demonstrates well Ramanuja's influence on his theology. The former, a key Christological claim and a particular favorite of Christian advaitins,³¹ could be read through a non-dualist lens as promoting the absolute unity between ātman and Brahman. The latter evokes a subtler Christological claim, the relationship between Jesus and his disciple, that becomes accentuated in *bhakti*'s understanding of the relationship between God and God's devotee as one of indwelling and total surrender. Here Appasamy's project of inculturation is not simply one of translation, though this was central to his process, but one in which the *bhakti* tradition informs his own Christology.

For both Upadhyaya and Appasamy the Indian context provided an opportunity to re-present Christianity in a more indigenous manner, but their projects did not end there. Rather both allowed the Indian context to inform their own theological reflection. Such

³⁰ A. J. Appasamy, *The Theology of Hindu Bhakti* (Madras: Christian Literature Center, 1971), 1. Sean M. Doyle, 'Reading John through *Bhakti* Eyes: The Hermeneutic of J. J. Appasamy,' in ed. Stephen R. Goodwin, *World Christianity in Local Context: Essays in Memory of David A. Kerr* (London: Continuum, 2009), 179.

³¹ Swami Vivekananda was also fond of this passage.

an interaction in which theologians attempt to make Christianity intelligible to the Indian context and allow this context to shape Christianity will become the benchmark for future Indian Christian theology. Important for Dalit theology will be how this cultural significance of Hinduism will shape future developments in Indian Christian theology. As Julius Lipner notes, ‘on the Hindu side, Upadhyaya’s dialogic poles were exclusively and unabashedly Sanskritic.’³² As inculturated theologies, Upadhyaya and Appasamy incorporated Hindu traditions that they were familiar with and that they found to be suitable vehicles for indigenizing Christianity. As Indian Christian theology continues to develop, however, Upadhyaya and Appasamy become more than examples, they become paradigms for how Indian Christian theology should become both Indian and Christian. High-caste forms of religiosity become the means for inculturation; a religiosity unfamiliar to and/or inaccessible to the new, majority Dalit demographic.

Dalit Theology: A Response to Indian Christian Theology and ‘Other Theologies’

A primary impetus for the creation of a Dalit Christian theology was the realization that the two phenomena outlined above never converged into single movement. The mass conversion of Dalit persons and communities to Christianity resulted in a dramatic demographic shift within the Indian Church, but it did not impact the process of theological inculturation. Seral Chatterji describes this era as ‘a time laden with great possibilities for an upsurge towards a powerful movement for social change’ and asks ‘why did this movement fail to turn the world upside down...why was not the new order and new community in Christ perceived as a part of Salvation history of all the oppressed

³² Lipner, 204.

in process here and now.³³ The failure in Indian Christian theology's development was, as V. Devasahayam notes, that 'Dalits were not recognized as people or subjects of theology.'³⁴ It had 'left the *bahujana*, the majority, out of its purview.'³⁵ Dalit Christians did not and could not participate in the creation of Indian Christian theology. The resulting lacuna meant that the struggles and aspirations of the Dalit community went unnoticed throughout the early processes of inculturation.³⁶

That individual theologians like Upadhyaya and Appasamy dialogued primarily with Sanskritic Hindu traditions—identified by latter Dalit theologians as high-caste, brahminical Hinduism—is itself not necessarily problematic. Their theology emerged out of their particular cultural and intellectual context. Upadhyaya, a Brahmin convert, and Appasamy, the son of a high-caste, Shaivite convert, engaged Hinduism in accordance with their familiarity with the tradition and with what they considered to be the most beneficial for the development of Indian Christian theology. They were not Dalits, and as such they lacked the requisite background to develop an Indian Christian theology rooted in Dalit experience and religiosity. A.P. Nirmal even praises them, albeit reservedly, as distinguished theologians.³⁷ He states:

³³ Seral K. Chatterji, 'Why Dalit Theology,' in ed. James Massey, *Indigenous People: Dalits: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), 198.

³⁴ V. Devasahayam, 'Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions,' in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, 274.

³⁵ Nirmal Minz, 'Meaning of Tribal Consciousness,' *Religion & Society* 6 (1989).

³⁶ Having provided a list of early Indian Christian theologians from upper caste/class families, including those mentioned above, Massey notes, 'if these names are deleted from Indian Christian theology, nothing will be left. We must remember that these thinkers and their experiences and search are very different from those of an average Christian Indian.' Massey, 'Ingredients for a Dalit Theology,' in *Indigenous People*, 339. Quoted in Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 40.

³⁷ In his work *Heuristic Explorations*, Nirmal states plainly, 'There is no need to idealize the glorious past of Indian Christian theology represented in the writings of these men.' A.P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: CLC, 1990), 27. K. Wilson offers a similar reflection. He states, 'At best the pride of Indian Christian theological tradition is demonstrated either in baptizing the Christian message in Hindu terminology or the Indianization of Christian metaphysics. More often than not, such theologies reflect the highbrow, urban oriented theoretical humdrum with no firm base in the living world. People, the real

In Brahma Bandhav Upaddhyaya [sic], we have a brilliant theologian who attempted a synthesis of Sankara's advaita Vedanta and Christian theology. In bishop A.J. Appasamy, we had a *bhakti marga* theologian who tried to synthesize Ramanuja's Vishista Advaita with Christian Theology.³⁸

Nirmal and his fellow early Dalit theologians directed their critique not against theologians like Upadhyaya or Appasamy, but instead against the subsequent institutionalization of the kind of Indian Christian theology they undertook. This theology certainly had its place and contributed significantly to the formation of an inculturated Indian Christianity; however, Indian Christian theology born from dialogue with high-caste Hinduism could not speak to, for, and from Dalit communities.

In its first pursuits of self-definition, Dalit theology followed the paths of both negation and affirmation. Negatively, Dalit theologians sought to demonstrate the differences between their project and those of previous Indian Christian theologians, Western theologians, liberation theologians, and contextual theologians. The Dalit context demanded a new mode of doing theology in India. Aspects of these 'other theologies' contributed to the development of Dalit theology, but their incorporation required Dalit theology to distinguish itself from them lest it become sublimated into already existing methods.³⁹ Positively, Dalit theologians began to articulate the 'Dalitness' of Dalit theology—the essence without which it would cease to be Dalit. Both these approaches aimed to create an appropriate response to the Dalit situation. Dalit theology could not be a continuation of Indian Christian theology as it had developed

people the suffering people do not matter here.' K. Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture,' in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, 157.

³⁸ Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 53-54.

³⁹ Franklyn Balasundaram identifies Indian Christian theology and Western Christian theology—a geographic qualification as much as a methodological one as he locates liberation theologies and third world theologies in this grouping—as constituting 'other theologies.' Franklyn J. Balasundaram, 'Dalit Theology and Other Theologies,' in *Frontier of Dalit Theology*, ed. V. Devasahayam, (ISPCK: Delhi, 1997).

over the past century nor could it be the mere repackaging of Latin American, black, or Third World theologies. According to Nirmal and following in the tradition of the *Dalit Sahitya* movement, Dalit theology needed to be a theology about Dalits, for Dalits, and by Dalits.⁴⁰

While first and foremost focused on the liberation of Dalit peoples, Dalit theology's purpose is not dissimilar to that of Indian Christian theology. Both are attempts to ground Indian theological reflection in the particularities of the Indian context. Whereas Indian Christian theology sought to converse with India's Hindu context—a conversation born from the particular contexts of those first Indian Christian theologians—Dalit theology starts with Dalit experience, particularly the experiences of caste and oppression. Each theology aims to speak to and from an Indian vantage point. Dalit theology's chief critique of Indian Christian theology is not that it exists nor that it is an illegitimate method of doing theology, but rather that Indian Christian theology has become the primary and institutionalized way of doing theology in India.⁴¹ Furthermore, the Church's uncritical acceptance of this model has permitted perceived oppressive structures within the Hindu tradition to permeate into Christian faith and practice. Indian Christian theology traditionally has privileged an already privileged minority within the

⁴⁰ Nirmal, 'Towards a Dalit Christian Theology,' 214. Nirmal is borrowing from M.N. Wankhade's definition of Dalit *Sahitya* as, '*Sahitya* produced by Dalits giving expression to their anger against those who have made them Dalits.'

⁴¹ As Dalit theology becomes increasingly politicized in subsequent years, the legitimacy of traditional forms of Indian Christian theology is questioned. Within Dalit theology its pursuit has been nearly completely abandoned. Non-Dalit theologians like K.P. Aleaz and Adrian Bird have attempted to reestablish fruitful dialogue between Indian Christian Theology and Dalit theology and second generation Dalit theologians like Rajkumar remain open to its possible contributions, but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. The methodological tension between Dalit theology and non-Dalit Indian Christian theology is best represented in this question of legitimacy: Do traditional forms of Indian Christian theology still have a contributive role to play in the future of doing Christian theology in India? If so, is it apposite or opposite to Dalit theology's ends?

Church and has failed to address the suffering and pain of those persons that comprise the majority of Indian Christians.

This critique of Indian Christian theology is then two-fold. First, a substantial portion of Indian Christians do not contribute significantly to the life, mission, and teaching of the Indian church. Sathianathan Clarke identifies this problem as the non-dialogical and non-representational nature of Indian Christian theology.⁴² A non-Dalit minority took the lead in the construction of an inculturated theology with the Dalit majority having little to no input in the process. Second, non-Dalit theologians initiated an interreligious dialogue with Indian traditions with which they were most familiar. Dalit religiosity did not enjoy the transition from mere superstition to esteemed partner in dialogue as Hindu philosophical and devotional traditions did. It remained on the outside while caste-based Hinduism influenced the shape of Indian Christian theology.

This disenfranchisement leads to and is exacerbated further by the second major problem that Clarke identifies as Indian-Christian theology's becoming an instrument of ideological co-option rather than human liberation.⁴³ In a more propositional stance than his predecessors, Clarke states, 'It could be said that theology sustained a process of hegemony by which the interests of the caste communities were espoused, strengthened and furthered in India.'⁴⁴ The co-option that followed is more likely a sin of omission rather than commission, but by failing to take heed of Dalit dissent against caste-centric Christianity, Indian Christian theology permitted caste ideology to flourish within the

⁴² Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 35-41.

⁴³ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 41-43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 41. Compare Clarke's statement to Nirmal's: It also became clear that depressed class converts continued to complain of indifference and neglect. All of this, however, did not make any change to Indian Christian theology's obsession with the Brahmanic tradition. It had not time or inclination to reflect theologically on the dalit converts who formed the majority of the Indian church.' Nirmal, 'Toward a Christian Dalit Theology,' 56.

church. Without Dalit participation in shaping the Church's ministry and theology, the status quo continued on unchallenged.

These two problems combined to create an inhospitable environment for Dalits within the Church for which they possessed little ability to critique and correct.

Theologically, Dalits lacked the buttressing necessary to offer a counter-theology/ideology to Brahmanically influenced Christianity. Ritually, they often faced congregational segregation, denial from Communion, and restriction to Church burial grounds. Ecclesially, within mainline Protestant and Catholic churches and seminaries they lacked access to administrative and leadership positions. Their marginalization and/or absence from religious institutions created a broader culture of indifference.

Whether or not the institutionalization of caste-ideology was purposeful, its continuation was unabated. Chatterji describes the systemic growth of this problem in the following passage:

The perceptions that creep into and finally dominate theological education, ministerial training, and Church perspective, are conducive to the maintenance of the status quo...by and large, the official theology of the churches tends to be influenced by the ideology of these higher castes trained in this climate of indifference to the realities of the socio-cultural factors. It is quite likely that even the dalits and tribals fall into line laid down by the 'mainstream' seminary training with its emphasis on abstractions and limitations of Western theology.⁴⁵

The socio-cultural and theological context out of which Dalit theology emerged proved incapable of addressing the needs—religious and otherwise—of Dalit communities. Local instances of prejudice in the Church were ignored and thus permitted while the theologians and ministers that the seminaries were producing did not possess the skills needed to reflect upon or minister to the Dalit situation. Indian Christian theology has failed to address adequately both the explicit structures of

⁴⁵ Chatterji, 'Why Dalit Theology,' 28.

dehumanization—economic exploitation, the perpetuation of caste-stigmatization and untouchability, and the violence waged against the Dalit community—and the implicit forms of oppression—the rejection of traditional Dalit religiosity and the non-caste-critical appropriation of Hindu philosophy and theology—within Indian society and the Church.⁴⁶ If the largest Christian constituency in India was to have a theology that was relevant and capable of offering good news it would necessarily need to arise from its own experiences. Dalit theology seeks to be a prophetic theological rejoinder to the ways in which Christian theology has been undertaken in India.

Though the modern Maharashtran Dalit movement shapes Dalit Theology's rhetoric, the emergence of Latin American Liberation theology, Third World theology, and contextual theologies provides the theology's methodological frame. The influx and subsequent influence of these theologies transformed the not-yet-Dalit theologians into Dalit theologians. Their significance is obfuscated, however, by the immediacy in which Dalit theology sought to differentiate itself from these 'other theologies.' The rush to appropriate and inculturate, a methodological holdover from Indian Christian theology, resulted in Dalit theologians demonstrating the ways in which these theologies could not speak to the Indian context rather than admitting the profound impact they had on the theology.

⁴⁶ V. Devasahayam elaborates on the particulars of the Indian church's explicit and implicit role in Dalit subjugation. He states, 'Christian Dalits are becoming increasingly aware of the indifference and insensitivity of the Indian Church to the sufferings, struggles, and aspirations of over 250 million Dalits in general and of Christian Dalits in particular. This Dalit church with upper caste leadership and upper caste theology forgot the social base of the Indian church. It has accommodated the caste system, which benefits the caste people, identified with the status quo in terms of social relations among Christian characterized by division, discrimination, and domination. It has grossly failed to generate a critical social consciousness. [The] Church's concern for maintaining institutional power, institutions serving the classes rather than the masses, has betrayed her call as a messianic movement.' V. Devasahayam, 'Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions,' 270.

To a degree Indian Christian theology has always been contextual and critical—especially with respects to non-Indian modes of theologizing—but it was a theological response composed in a still undefined and largely un-established Christian landscape. Dalit theology, instead, is a theological response to a century-old way of doing theology in India. Latin American Liberation theology, third world theology, and contextual theologies, provided a hermeneutical key to critically appraise already established theologies. In establishing the experiences of the poor and oppressed on the underside of history as the starting locus for theology, these theologies posited a new subject and context for theological reflection. Persons matter; contexts matter. And now a hitherto unvoiced people were advocating not only for their experiences’ legitimacy as a grounds for doing theology, but also their primacy. Even more important than their methodological contributions, the very existence of these theologies demonstrated the possibility and necessity of doing theology from a Dalit perspective. Their arrival into Indian Christian thinking posed the crucial question why had not such a theology taken hold already in India.

As novel as Dalit theology is, it did not materialize out of ether. In 1971 M.M. Thomas published his work *Salvation and Humanization* which began to explore the issues of injustice, poverty, and caste.⁴⁷ Thomas combined with the late 1970’s experimentation with liberation and contextual theologies in the form of a Peoples’ Theology provided a fecund ground for Dalit theology to take root. Poverty rather than caste, however, was the primary focus of these earlier endeavors. Injecting a liberative potency into Indian Christian theology, they were critical of societal and ecclesial

⁴⁷ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues in the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1971).

institutions' failure to address the abject poverty in which a great percentage of Indians struggled to survive. This Indian Christian liberation theology remained indebted to Latin American liberation theology's language of social analysis.⁴⁸ Focusing on class rather than caste followed closely the theological work occurring outside of India. Alongside Latin American liberation theologians, third world theologians like the Aloysius Pieris, Tissa Balasuriya, and Jean Marc Ela, while advocating the need for liberation theology's inculturation, granted economic exploitation prime place in their thinking. Only upon deeper reflection did the not-yet-Dalit theologians realize the particularity and peculiarity of the Indian context.

The simple transposition of liberation theology's methodology could not sufficiently address the problem of poverty when the more pervasive problem of caste underpinned it. Dalit theologians like Devasahayam believed that liberation theologies obscured the truer nature of Dalit oppression. He states, 'Dalits were denied a name and face and were hidden under the general rubric of "the poor."' Dalits were denied a voice and hence were deprived of our hope.'⁴⁹ India has many poor, but not all of India's poor suffer under the weight of caste equally.

Clarke offers a similar, but more nuanced assessment of Latin American liberation theology's possible contribution to Dalit theology. While acknowledging the

⁴⁸ The appropriation of language rather than theory describes Indian Christian theology's turn to liberation theologies. Dalit theology's ascendancy precluded any sustained reflection on liberation theology's possible theoretical contributions as it became the primary offshoot of this early Indian Christian liberation theology. Now Dalit theology ultimately uses Latin American liberation theology as a foil to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Indian context.

⁴⁹ Devasahayam, 'Doing Dalit Theology,' 274. The debate between the Dalit Panthers over Marxism's or Ambedkarism's primacy echoes the call Dalit theologians make to cultivate a theological response that goes beyond liberation theology's reliance on economic categories. The former argued for a class-based analysis of the Dalit predicament in the hopes that Dalit groups could unite with other economically reform-minded groups. The latter argued that only through a thorough application of Ambedkar's caste analysis and programs of untouchable uplift could Dalit liberation be achieved. The majority of Dalit theologians would align themselves with the Ambedkarites.

influence of liberation theology upon Dalit theology, he too finds a purely economic examination of the Dalit context to be wanting. He states, ‘what is hardly dealt within this process of analysis are the elements of religion and culture. In a sense this plays into the hands of the forces that want to obscure Dalit culture and religious forms.’⁵⁰ While an economic-centered focus may be suitable in a more religio-cultural homogenous context like Latin America—though Latin American theologians too now are more attuned to the heterogeneity present in their own contexts—it is not sufficient to address the many variables at play in the Indian one. Founded upon religious, cultural, and economic prejudices, caste stigmatization and oppression and not class-based economic exploitation alone have become the hermeneutical lens through which Dalit theology develops.

Dalit Theology and Dalit Identity

The re/discovery of Dalit identity has defined the theological agenda of Dalit theology. While Rajkumar is correct to note that identity affirmation comprises just one objective within its praxiological framework—the second objective being the promotion and realization of a liberative social vision—identity, nevertheless, continues to be the central pursuit of Dalit theology.⁵¹ Questions like who are the Dalits and what is the Dalitness of Dalit theology echo the efforts towards identity construction that the Maharashtra

⁵⁰ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 45.

⁵¹ Here Rajkumar insightfully pieces together the variegated strands of Dalit theology to construct an essential framework for understanding the methods and objectives of Dalit theology. As its corpus is comprised primarily of essays composed for conferences and collections, Dalit theology lacks a centralized system. One of Rajkumar’s greatest contributions to Dalit theology has been his ability to bring these numerous texts together in a systematic way identifying the themes and methods that carry through thirty years of thinking. He states concisely, ‘the dialectic between the what (objective/s) and how (approach/es) of Dalit theology can be said to constitute the praxiological framework of Dalit theology. While *identity affirmation* and *liberative social vision* are the objectives of Dalit theology, *liberative partnerships* constitute the approach’ (italics are Rajkumar’s). Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 43. Who these liberative partners might be will be explored below through comparative theological reflection.

movement, especially the literary movement, undertook. Similar to the process in *Dalit Sahitya*, Dalit identity and Dalit theology developed alongside one another. Identity was worked out as the theology was worked out whereby each element informed the other.

This process of mutual development differentiates Dalit theology from other liberation and contextual theologies. Although conscientization is not unique to it, the nearly wholesale creation of a hitherto nonexistent group identity is quite different than fleshing out already rich identities like ‘black’ or ‘African.’⁵² Ten years prior to Dalit theology’s first writings, the category Dalit did not exist in any substantial way.

Categories such as ‘untouchable,’ ‘outcaste,’ ‘*harijan*,’ and ‘*avarna*’ were commonplace, but Dalit identity rejects these titles. Dalit is a self-appellated and self-determined name, an identity constructed for and by Dalits themselves. The first writings in Dalit theology attempted to expand upon this nascent identity seeking to construct a Dalit Christian identity that would be informed by both the Maharashtran Movement and the Gospel. Formerly a sociological and aesthetical category, Dalit becomes now a theological one as well.

Like the literary movement, Dalit theology roots identity in the particularities of caste oppression, stigmatization, and dehumanization and in the liberative hopes of a people aspiring for a life free of these pains. These two poles of Dalit identity affirmation are essential. The first promotes a critical consciousness awakened to the reality of their

⁵² Concerned by the tendency of Dalit groups to organize under sub-caste identities like Parayars and Pallars, P. Mohan Larbeer distinguishes the Dalit experience from the Black experience. He states, ‘those who pursue such a course cite the example of the Black Movement. But that is a flawed argument. The Black identity as such, is being affirmed by the Blacks, mainly because it is natural and imbibed in their heritage, while it is not so in the case of the untouchables, where their identity is one which was imposed by others and it certainly is not a proud thing to be upheld.’ P. Mohan Larbeer, ‘Dalit Identity: A Theological Reflection,’ in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, 378. Whereas the Black Movement and black theology are recovering and affirming the beauty and inherent dignity of black identity, Dalit theology rejects untouchable, outcaste identity as irredeemably negative replacing it instead with Dalit identity.

suffering and the awareness of the cultural and religious systems that support it. The second points to Dalit persons' inherent dignity instilling a sense of pride and self-worth in a denigrated people. Only in maintaining the tension between these two poles can an authentically liberating Dalit identity be forged. An identity that focuses solely on the former risks glorifying suffering; an identity that concentrates on the latter alone could become rudderless. Developed together, they present the fullest account of who Dalits are now: a people with a pain-filled past striving in the present for a liberated future.

Identity affirmation, however, includes also identity negation. In answering who Dalits are, Dalit theologians must answer also who Dalits are not. P. Mohan Larbeer states, 'the most unfortunate thing for us about all our sufferings, was the names given to us by upper castes, through which we were subdued and marginalized.'⁵³ These names include the socio-religious pre-Vedic and Vedic: *dasa*, *dashyu*, *asura*, *avarana*, *panchama*, and *chandala*; and the colonial and bureaucratic: exterior caste, depressed classes, backward classes, untouchables, scheduled castes, and *harijans*.⁵⁴ Larbeer does not exaggerate when he says, 'these names were most degrading.'⁵⁵ Even the bureaucratic designations with the exception of Gandhi's preferred *harijan*—though Dalits find this term problematic as well—connote an absence of worth be it economic, educational, or social. These negative identities become internalized wounding the psyche of Dalit persons in a self-defeating confirmation of the status quo. For non-Dalits they serve to reinforce cultural presumptions and reify social status—theirs and Dalits'. The self-

⁵³ Larbeer, 'Dalit Identity,' 379.

⁵⁴ Arthur Macdonnell's *A Practical Sanskrit Dictionary* glosses these names as: *dasa*=foe, demon, infidel, slave, servant; *dashyu*=class of demons hostile to the gods, man of non-Brahmanical tribes; *asura*=belonging to the demons, demon-like; *avarana*=without caste, blameworthy; *panchama*=5th part [reference to the 5th of four castes]; *chandala*=man of the lowest stratum of society, universally despised and shunned, mixed caste offspring of a Sudra and Brahmani, a good-for-nothing; *mleccha*=foreigner, barbarian, ignorance of the vernacular.

⁵⁵ Larbeer, 'Dalit Identity,' 380.

appellation 'Dalit' seeks to undercut these prejudices. Lacking the history of these other terms, it does not carry their social and psychological baggage. It is a blank slate upon which Dalits may author a new future.

Before achieving that future, Dalits must reckon with their present and past. Here the construction of identity incorporates Dalit lived experience. Though its application and frequency are new, the term 'dalit' is not entirely a neologism. It possesses Sanskrit (*√dal*) and, as Dalit Biblical scholars suggest, Hebrew (*√dll*) etymologies. The Dalit Literary Movement selected it precisely for its denotation. In both linguistic families the term conveys a sense of brokenness and lowliness; in the passive construction (*daliton*), it means the one who is broken and the one who is made low. This definition makes manifest, Nirmal's sixth definition of the term, the plight of the Dalit people.⁵⁶ It neither obscures their situation as the bureaucratic and Gandhian formulations do nor does it imply a naturally inherent indignity as the pre-Vedic and Vedic concepts do. Rather, the word Dalit names the injustice Dalit people suffer and locates the origin of this plight as being extra-Dalit. They are not responsible for their brokenness. It is a condition forced upon them.

Much of the foundational work in Dalit theology began with an explanation of who Dalits were. These first instances of identity affirmation tended towards establishing the first pole of Dalit identity by focusing on the injustices that Dalits suffered and suffer. The abuses chronicled begin in the pre-historical myths of Dalit origin. Whether it be the local-communal accounts of how a particular Dalit *jati* fell into outcaste status or the more pan-Indian Aryan Invasion theory, these accounts most often begin with an

⁵⁶ Nirmal, 'Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,' 139. Nirmal's previous five definitions are: 1) the broken, the rent, the burst, the split; 2) the opened, the expended; 3) the bisected; 4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered; and 5) the downtrodden, the crushed, the destroyed.

idealized Dalit past violently stolen by high-caste communities and conclude with the present degradation Dalits endure. Phillip Peacock notes the near omnipresence of these myths, especially the latter, in early Dalit theology stating:

There is probably no student that has escaped the Aryan invasion theory. It has been written about and preached as Gospel truth in almost every forum and publication on Dalit issues...Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that Dalit theology seems to be in the shadow of the Aryan invasion theory.⁵⁷

All these myths serve a similar etiological function. They provide an account of the how a people or a particular community became outcaste, but more importantly they do so in a way that removes Dalit culpability. Psychologically, these stories help alleviate the self-stigmatization Dalits place upon themselves. They have arrived at their social location neither through any action they performed nor any their ancestors performed. These myths posit an original injustice done against Dalits from which all subsequent injustices they suffer follow.

From pre-history, Dalit theologians enter into history and advance towards the present. Recognizing that 'Dalits have been makers of history but were not historiographers,' Dalit theologians have sought to promote a historical Dalit consciousness piecing together what they can from a nearly lost history.⁵⁸ It is a consciousness focused on pain and humiliation. Nirmal and Devasahayam trace these experiences through their depiction and codification in the Indian and Hindu literary tradition. Laws prohibiting temple entry and access to sacred scriptures, the fate of Shambuka—a Sudra Rama kills for performing austerities—and Eklavya—a Nishada

⁵⁷ Philip Vinod Peacock, 'In the Beginning is also an End: Expounding and Exploring Theological Resourcefulness of Myths of Dalit Origins,' in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 78-79. Peacock rejects outright the Aryan Invasion Theory as being both ahistorical and harmful to Dalit theology's progress. He does find Ambedkar's story of outcaste origin in the Broken People—Buddhists punished for their conversion—to be a useful counter narrative. Furthermore, he presents the local myths of origin as being especially conducive for constructive theological reflection.

⁵⁸ V. Devasahayam, 'Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions,' 274.

(tribal) archer who out of loyalty to Drona offers his right thumb so that Arjuna might retain his place as the greatest archer—and ignoble customs like Dalit women being forbidden to wear blouses and Dalits required to wear bells and a spittoon to prevent pollution, are presented to help craft a history from no-history.⁵⁹

The modern era, however, provides the greatest amount of material and experience for the construction of a Dalit identity. Autobiographies, personal testimonies, poems, and dramas bear witness to the types of oppression Dalits face within the Church and within society. Sociological and anthropological research alongside governmental and nongovernmental organizations' reports supply a wealth of secondary information. An oft-cited Indian National Crime Bureau report from 2000 reveals that, 'every hour two Dalits are assaulted; every day three Dalit women are raped, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched,' to which Human Rights watch groups add that many more crimes go unreported and/or unprosecuted.⁶⁰ These experiences, spanning pre-history to the present day, are the foundation for Dalit identity. As Webster states, 'this theology begins not with good news but with a call to Dalit Christians to face the truth about themselves.' Pathos is the true beginning of Dalit theology.

⁵⁹ Nirmal especially relies upon stories and laws concerning Sudras to fashion his historical narrative. Their significant presence in his work is most probably a carryover from his original essay, 'Towards a Sudra Theology.' Though it is probable, it is not appropriate to add that whatever Sudras suffered Dalits suffered more. Instead it is better to see the paucity of Dalit material as being further evidence to their socio-religious position outside the tradition. As the lowest, yet still a *varna* class, Sudras occupy a place within the tradition that Dalits simply do not.

⁶⁰ Hillary Maywell, 'India's "Untouchables" Face Violence, Discrimination,' National Geographic News, June 3, 2003.

A Suffering Identity

The construction of a new and positive identity remains one of the chief ends of the Dalit theological project. As Nirmal states, ‘the ultimate goal of this liberation movement...cannot be simply the gaining of the rights, reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or conversely our full divinity, the ideal of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, in us.’⁶¹ To achieve this end, however, Dalits must reckon with Webster’s ‘truth,’ the recognition of a present identity constituted by their experiences of marginalization and persecution in Indian society and the Indian churches. The experiences of Dalit suffering become the hermeneutical lens through which Dalit theology develops. This suffering, both a reality and an identity, is the primary *locus theologicus*. M.E. Prabhakar highlights this necessary starting point for Dalit theology in his essay on Dalit Christology. He states:

In the context of the Dalit reality and the search for Dalit Theology, the emphasis was laid on the need for making efforts to reinterpret God’s liberating presence in a society that consistently denies Dalits their humanity, socially ostracizes them, economically exploits them and culturally subjugates them...It is obvious that the Dalit understanding of God’s revelation and presence will be tempered by their subaltern existence in an oppressive society.⁶²

The central place of suffering in Dalit theology is perhaps realized most fully in Nirmal’s understanding of pathetic knowing and *pathos* epistemology. Following the examples of liberation theologies, Nirmal affirms both the dialectic between theory and praxis and the ‘praxiological basis of human knowledge.’⁶³ In an effort to further distinguish Dalit theology from other liberation and contextual theologies, however, Nirmal proposes *pathos* to be prior to either theory or praxis. He states:

⁶¹ Nirmal, ‘A Dialogue with Dalit Literature,’ 77.

⁶² M.E. Prabhakar, ‘Christology in Dalit Perspective,’ in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, 405-6.

⁶³ Nirmal, ‘Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,’ 141.

For the sufferer more certain than any principle, more certain than any proposition, more certain than any thought and more certain than any action is his/her pain-pathos. Even before he/she *thinks* about pathos; even before he/she acts to remove or redress or overcome this pathos, pain-pathos is simply there. It is through this pain-pathos that the sufferer knows God. That is because the sufferer in and through his/her pain-pathos knows that God participates in human pain.⁶⁴

The primacy of pathos, pain, and suffering defined the trajectory of Dalit theology for its first two decades.⁶⁵ Dalit Biblical hermeneutics, Dalit systematic theology, and Dalit practical theology develop from the presupposition that the Dalitness of Dalit theology are these experiences of pathos. The second pole of Dalitness, the assertion of dignity, humanness, agency, while not forgotten, is contracted into the now singular category of pathos. With pathos becoming the essential way of being and knowing in the

⁶⁴ Nirmal, 'Doing Theology,' 141. Whether Nirmal's statement represents a distinction from or a disruption of liberation theology's epistemology, especially Latin American liberation theology, is difficult to gauge. For both rhetorical and theological reasons, Dalit theologians have sought to differentiate their project from other liberation theologies on account of the particularities of the Indian context. Later in this paragraph, Nirmal will quote from Leonardo Boff's *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World*. From this citation and Nirmal's epistemological framework, can one infer a familiarity with the more epistemologically focused work of Clodovis Boff? Two passages from C. Boff's 'Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,' may reveal Nirmal's familiarity or even reliance upon his thinking. First: 'although the vocabulary of liberation theology is not always fine tuned here, its actual theological practice usually operates correctly; that is, it starts with the poor, and with Christ as the first among them. To be sure, when we theologically say we start with the poor—just as when we say we start with reality—we are actually starting further away than that: with faith. It is only methodological that we begin with "seeing," or "reality," when in fact faith is always there as the alpha and omega of the entire process. And this is even more evident in the reflection, the liberation theology, of the people themselves, who are at once oppressed and religious.' Second: 'from its point of departure in a concrete praxis at the side of the oppressed, liberation theology comes forward today as a new theological spirit, a new manner of theologizing. This new manner is expressed in concrete language, not an abstract one, a language charged with *pathos*, not a cold, dry one, a language that is prophetic, not doctrinaire.' C. Boff writes as exactly as he thinks rigorously. The question for Nirmal and Dalit theology would then be, do they maintain the necessary dialectical tension between these two starting points, what C. Boff calls 'the formal'—faith/living faith—and the 'material'—praxis? Does the emphasis on pathos for Dalit epistemology function similarly as the poor for Boff, in which the particularities of Dalit experience modify the starting point, but do not present a necessarily new starting point—a move of distinction? Or is pathos a radically new point of departure, truly prior to either Boff's formal and material starting points—a move of disruption? The significance for Dalit theology is in determining whether pathos/pain/suffering functions theologically or pathologically. If it is the former it provides a proper foundation for a liberative theology. If it is the latter it presents an obstacle to Dalit liberation. C. Boff, 'Epistemology and the Method of the Theology of Liberation,' in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, eds. Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 59 and 65 respectively.

⁶⁵ Clarke's 1998 *Dalits and Christianity* will be the first major work that breaks, more slightly than severely, from a purely pathos-centric understanding of Dalit theology. It would be another decade still for a more robust corrective to be offered by Clarke, Rajkumar, Peacock, and others.

world, the dialectic between the two poles of Dalit identity breaks down, as does the dialect between the two poles of Dalit theology—identity affirmation and a liberative social vision. The reification of a pathos-based identity stunts the development of a critical consciousness.

Conscientization, an awakening to the realities of Dalit pathos—beyond the visceral experiencing of their reality—necessitates an awareness of the religio-cultural and economic institutions that perpetuate pathos, a recognition that they can be challenged, and a realization that they can be transformed. When pathos functions theologically, a liberative social vision is allowed to inform the construction of theology and identity. When pathos operates pathologically, a liberative social vision is relegated to merely an end, rather than a contributing means. It would be inaccurate and unfair to say that the entire Dalit theological project up until five years ago was pathological. Instead, it was patho-theological, focusing on suffering's essentialness in Dalit identity and theology, at the expense of agency and ultimately liberation.⁶⁶

The particularity of pathetic knowing led Nirmal and other early theologians to call for a methodological exclusivism. This exclusivity primarily pertains to other theologies and serves as a safeguard against accommodation to or conquest by

⁶⁶ Though hers is not a theological reflection, Aditya Nigam helpfully situates Dalit epistemology within a strategic and political setting. She states, 'What continuously pits the dalit against these categories framing thought and political action, therefore, is the experience of subaltern location, which experiences modernity as simultaneously liberating and as a denial of voice and agency. This is what gives centrality to the category of experience in dalit scholarship and lies at the root of the widespread distrust of non-dalit accounts of dalit history. What appears here as the essentialisation of dalit identity in this insistence of dalit accounts of their own history, seems to be in fact, an attempt to reclaim dalit voice from the hegemonic practices of historiography.' Aditya Nigam, 'Modernity, Nation: Epistemology of the Dalit Critique,' *Economic and Political Weekly* 25.48 (2000): 4265-6. Nigam captures double experience of Dalit Christians, the awareness of the liberating potentiality of Christianity and its present obstruction to the actualization of this liberation.

dominant/ing theologies.⁶⁷ Although Nirmal understands this exclusivism to be restricted to methodology and not communities, he and his contemporaries do propose an epistemic gradation concluding that while Dalit theology ‘can be attempted at different levels [of knowing]...authentic Dalit theology must arise out of Dalit pain-pathos.’⁶⁸ A methodological isolationism has allowed the theology to develop without much academic and ecclesial interference, and M.E. Prabhakar is correct in noting, ‘to speak of dalit theology is a liberative action itself, considering that theology has been for too long the preserve of the elite, an academic discipline and an intellectual activity with little or no direct contact with the realities experienced by people.’⁶⁹ Whether or not development can be equated with flourishing is a question that has put the test to its exclusivity.⁷⁰

Present Dalit theologians have come now to reconsider the necessity of maintaining a strict exclusivism. Clarke, and more recently Andersen H. M. Jeremiah, both have noted that Dalit theology itself, at times, has been disconnected from the experiences, especially religious experiences, of Dalit communities.⁷¹ It is a disconnect perhaps born from the fact that many Dalit theologians, then and now, are themselves not

⁶⁷ Nirmal, ‘Doing Dalit Theology,’ 142-3. These dominant/ing theologies are Balasundaram’s ‘other theologies’: traditional Western Christian theology and traditional Indian Christian theology.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Nirmal formulates a three-tier system of knowing: 1) pathetic knowing—born from firsthand Dalit experience; 2) empathetic knowing—arising from experiences similar to Dalit ones, Sudras and other oppressed groups, but nevertheless not Dalit; and 3) sympathetic knowing—emerging within groups that ally themselves with the Dalit cause. Dalit theology’s methodological exclusivism remains a debated issue.

⁶⁹ M.E. Prabhakar, ‘The Search for Dalit Theology,’ 47.

⁷⁰ These questions concerning flourishing and success are presented in the opening of this chapter.

⁷¹ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*. Andersen H. M. Jeremiah, ‘Dalit Christians in India: Reflections from the “Broken Middle,”’ *Studies in World Christianity* 17.3 (2001): 258-274. Similarly, Rajkumar, while not advocating exclusivism, notes that prior attempts at it have failed. He uses the anthropological categories etic and emic language and states, ‘my use of the phrase “etic-perspective” here refers to the intense Christianization of Dalit theology as well as Dalit theology’s methodological derivation from and dependence upon Latin American Liberation Theology and Afro-American Black Theology, both of which in my opinion have estranged the theoretical framework of Dalit theology from the empirical realities of Dalit existence.’ The primacy here is placed on Dalit lived experiences as they are in fact lived and not as they have been projected onto Dalit lives. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 62.

Dalit or are only later in life realizing their Dalitness. Exclusivity also limits opportunities for critical reflection, which occasionally necessitates outsider input, and hinders fostering authentic liberative partnerships. Rajkumar notes that exclusive theological reflection, in this case asserting the ‘Victor-hood’ of God in the Exodus and Deuteronomic Creed paradigms, ‘has the dangerous potential to reinforce an antagonistic and polemic binarism of “us” and “them” which...undermine[s] Dalit efforts to work alongside others in their quest for liberation.’⁷² The integrative, liberative vision Dalit theology possesses extends beyond the immediate Dalit Christian communities to include not only non-Christian Dalit communities, but also the Church and Indian society as whole. Authenticity of the Dalit experience and Dalit theology’s vision necessitate protected space in order to develop and to be realized. Exclusivism grants such a space, but that space is confined and restrictive. The task for current Dalit theologians is to develop a more inclusive methodology that rather than choking out Dalit theology allows it instead to blossom.

As the epistemological grounds for doing theology in a Dalit key, pathos-pain establishes not only the criterion for whom can do Dalit theology, but also informs its content and shapes its agenda. Nirmal calls this centering on suffering a ‘methodological primacy.’⁷³ He states:

In such a theological venture the primacy of the term ‘dalit’ will have to be conceded as against the primacy of the term ‘Christian’ in the dominant theological tradition...What this means is that the non-Dalit world will ask us ‘What is Christian’ about Dalit Theology? Our reply will have to be: ‘It is the *dalitness* which is ‘Christian’ about Dalit Theology...The ‘Christian’ for this theology is *exclusively* the ‘Dalit.’ What this exclusivism implies is the

⁷² Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 64.

⁷³ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 219.

affirmation that the Triune God—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—is on the side of the Dalits and not the non-Dalits.⁷⁴

The experience of Dalit pathos provides the interpretive frame through which God's revelation is understood and reflected upon. Who and how God is understood is inextricably linked to who and how Dalits are. Dalit theologians read Scripture with an eye towards revealing God's Good News for humanity in general and for Dalits in particular. It is a reading that affirms their humanness and points to their liberation—physical, but also spiritual and psychological. Here, early Dalit theologians built upon the hermeneutical examples of other contextual and liberation theologies, but again with an approach that would incorporate the particularities of caste oppression. Two paradigms became especially key for this theological reflection: the Deuteronomic Creed (Dt 26: 5-12) and the Suffering Servant (Is 52:13-53:12). In both, pathos is central.

Nirmal selects the Deuteronomic Creed because it incorporates the Exodus paradigm favored by liberation and contextual theologians and highlights the need for Dalits to develop historical consciousness. The emphasis on the latter is how Nirmal begins the process of differentiating the Dalit context from those of other liberation-oriented theologies. Latin American Liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría notes the way in which the Exodus paradigm opens theology to history. He states, 'Moses speaks of a past within a present toward the future. It is the God of the fathers who is seeing the present oppression of God's children in Egypt, and who launches them toward a future that will come through Yahweh's covenanted promise to his people.'⁷⁵ The Deuteronomic Creed re-presents the Exodus paradigm, but from a different point and place in Israel's history. It recalls that moment of liberation, reaffirms the promise to be a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 219-220.

⁷⁵ Ignacio Ellacuría, 'The Historicity of Christian Salvation,' in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 259.

people, this God's people, with a land, a land that flows milk and honey, and it anticipates entering that land, enjoying its bounty, and offering its first-fruits to God. On the boundaries of the Wilderness, no longer suffering in Egypt, but having not entered the promised land, the Creed—a ritual formula—depicts the already/not yet tension that accompanies the work of liberation.

For Nirmal, the Creed is a story of identity revelation.⁷⁶ The wandering Aramean, the deracinated ancestor, shifts from being a no-person—'once we were no people'—to God's chosen people, a community that grows despite oppression—'now we are God's people' (1 Pt 2:10).⁷⁷ This new identity; however, is new only in that it was unknown, forgotten, or more precisely ground out by the Israelites' experience in Egypt. The Exodus event reveals, that is uncovers, unveils, an identity and relationship that God had established already with the fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At no point during their time in Egypt had the Israelites ceased to be God's people nor had God ceased to be their God. The Exodus reaffirms this identity and these relationships, and, following the theology of the Elohist author, makes them more immediate and intimate⁷⁸. God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is now the LORD, your God. As Ellacuría states:

The God of Israel is defined by that divine presence, which brings the people out of the oppression of Israel; the people of Israel reach God *more*, and in a different way than their fathers, because Israel has experienced in its new history something new of God. The act of leaving Egypt...[is] the originating place of a

⁷⁶ Here Nirmal echoes K. Wilson's understanding of revelation in which what is made known is not only God as God, but the human person as human person. Wilson states, 'Revelation, therefore, is intended to help the understander to understand the nature of reality in an authentic way. When man is revealed of his true condition what transpires is a cultural awakening. Revelation, in short, is cultural renaissance.' K. Wilson. 'An Approach to Christian Dalit Theology,' 52.

⁷⁷ Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 60. This passage from 1 Peter calls back to God's proclamation to the Israelites through Moses that, 'I will take you as my people, and I will be your God' (Ex 6:7).

⁷⁸ According to the Source-Critical method in Biblical scholarship, the Elohist, unlike the Jahwist author, refrains from using the divine Tetragrammaton (YHWH) until God reveals God's name to Moses.

new revelatory experience of God, the experience that provides the most explicit revelation of humanity and the true God.⁷⁹

Recalling this people-making and God-making event, the Deuteronomic Creed contributes to the historical consciousness of Israel. Nirmal appropriates the paradigm for Dalit theology in a similar manner. Grafting the experiences of Dalit pathos onto the pathos experiences of Israel in Egypt, he reshapes the Creed to provide a means for grounding Dalit historical consciousness in God's action in history on behalf of Dalits. He states, 'the historical Dalit consciousness in India depicts even greater and deeper *pathos* than is found in the Deuteronomic Creed.'⁸⁰ The great Exodus event for Dalits, at least Christian Dalits, occurs in their conversion.⁸¹ Though Dalit Christians continue to suffer externally the oppression of Brahmanism and caste oppression, such pathos need no longer yoke them spiritually or psychologically. This interior liberation, the beginning to realize full humanness, 'the ideal of the *imago Dei*,' provides the hope-filled foundation for working towards exterior liberation.⁸²

Dalit theology's re-conception of the Deuteronomic Creed affirms a pathos filled history and a God who enters history and works towards liberation in cooperation with the oppressed. Like all creeds, it is communal and confessional in character. The Dalit Christian community confesses they believe that God, made known in history and Scripture, is the Dalit God. This faith-filled assertion leads to a second paradigm and confession: 'the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the

⁷⁹ Ellacuría, 'The History of Christian Salvation,' 260.

⁸⁰ Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 61. Nirmal here seeks to differentiate Dalits' experience of pathos from all other peoples', historical and contemporaneous, but does so problematically. How this is problematic will be explored below.

⁸¹ In fact Nirmal later fuses the Exodus event with conquest of Canaan. With what must be an allusion to Joshua outside the walls of Jericho, Nirmal states, 'our *pathos* should give birth to our protest—a very loud protest. Our protest should be so loud that walls of Brahmanism should come tumbling down.' Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 62.

⁸² Ibid.

Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He is a servant God—a God who serves.’⁸³ The God who cooperates in Dalit liberation is a God who serves and, furthermore, a God who knows their pathos intimately. The ‘Suffering Servant’ in Isaiah becomes the second paradigm for Dalit theology especially in its Christological affirmations. The life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus reveals a God dedicated to service and familiar with *pathos*. In Jesus, the Dalitness of God is enfleshed and made known.

Given both the pathos experience of Dalits and their service oriented function in Indian society—including the performance of polluting and humiliating tasks like carrion removal and latrine cleaning—one is not surprised that the image of the Suffering Servant would become so central to Dalit theology. M.E. Prabhakar states, ‘What the Dalits think of Jesus Christ and God’s saving act in and through him is integrally linked with their dehumanized social existence and their hopes for a future in Christ, freed from all inhumanity and injustice.’⁸⁴ The Suffering Servant paradigm allows for a double participation. God participates in Dalit pathos, and Dalits participate in God’s service-oriented ministry. Regarding the former and describing the language of Isaiah, Nirmal states, ‘that is the language used to describe the servant language is full of pathos. That is the language used for God the God of the dalits...the language that mirrors the God of the dalits and dalits themselves.’⁸⁵ With respects to the latter, Nirmal states, ‘servitude is innate in the God of the dalits...this means we participated in this servant-God’s ministries. To speak of a Servant-God, therefore, is to recognize and identify Him as a

⁸³ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 63.

⁸⁴ M.E. Prabhakar, ‘Christology in Dalit Perspective,’ 405.

⁸⁵ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 65.

truly Dalit Deity.⁸⁶ The Suffering Servant paradigm affirms the centrality of pathos experience, which is now coupled with the Dalit experience of servitude.

The Deuteronomic Creed locates God as being on the side of the Dalits, working with them towards their liberation. The Suffering Servant paradigm makes an even more ‘shocking’ claim.⁸⁷ God works in history for Dalit liberation, and in Jesus Christ God participates in service, a service that is analogous to the service that Dalits perform. Nirmal poses a question to Dalits, to the Indian Christian Church, and to the Church universal: ‘Are we prepared to say that my house-maid, my sweeper, my *bhangi* is God? It is precisely in this sense that our God is a servant God. He is a waiter, a dhobi, a bhangi. Traditionally, all such services have been the lot of Dalits.’⁸⁸ In taking on service, the *svadharma* of the Dalits, service becomes God’s *svadharma*.⁸⁹ God redeems this work, humanizes this work, and makes such work holy. The humiliating and polluting tasks that Dalits are ordered to perform—both commanded to and created for—find dignity in their divine performance.

These two key paradigms find their ultimate embodiment in the person of Jesus Christ. Nirmal states, ‘we proclaim and affirm that Jesus Christ whose followers we are was himself a dalit—despite being a Jew. It further means that both his humanity and his divinity are to be understood in terms of his dalitness.’⁹⁰ His dalit identity is revealed in his genealogy, a family tree which features several women with outsider-like status: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and ‘Uriah’s wife’ Bathsheba. His life experiences, marked by ‘rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering, and finally death,’ make him the ‘Prototype of

⁸⁶ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 64.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

all Dalits’ as he ‘underwent dalit experiences.’⁹¹ His ministry from the proclamation of the Nazareth Manifesto (Lk 4:14-30)—in which Jesus defines his ministry as proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed—to the cleansing of the Temple place him on the margins of society religiously and socially.⁹² His associations with persons on the outside and the periphery of society, prostitutes; tax collectors; the sick; religious-others, his table fellowship with them, his service to them, all make known his Dalitness. And finally the cross reveals the true extent of Jesus’ Dalitness. Nirmal states:

On the cross, he was the broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven as under man—the dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term. ‘My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?’ he cried aloud from the cross. The Son of God feels that he is God-forsake. That feeling of being God-forsaken is at the heart of our Dalit experience and dalit consciousness in India. It is the dalitness of divinity and humanity that the cross of Jesus symbolizes.⁹³

Jesus Christ is a Dalit, and reveals to Dalit Christians that God is a Dalit God.

Nirmal, Prabhakar, and other first generation Dalit theologians found this confession to possess a great deal of liberative potency for the Dalit community. Nirmal opens his essay with quotations from the *Rig Veda* X.90 and the *Manu Dharma Shastra*, which ontologically and socio-religiously prescribe servanthood for Sudras, and later includes the story of Rama killing Shambuka, a Sudra, for performing *tapascharya*. Nirmal’s intent is to juxtapose Hinduism, a religion that oppresses Dalits and worships a god who is a ‘killer and murder of dalits,’⁹⁴ with Christianity, a religion that affirms the humanity of Dalits and proclaims a God who is Dalit and who works towards their liberation. For

⁹¹ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 66-7.

⁹² Nirmal here makes a direct connection between Jesus’ cleansing of the temple to Ambedkar’s efforts to gain temple entry for Dalits. Ibid., 69.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 63.

Nirmal, conversion is the first step in the processes of conscientization and liberation. God's action in history and Jesus' example provide the ground for Dalits to begin to assert their agency and to work towards a liberative social vision. In saying yes to a God that says yes to Dalits and their experiences, Christian Dalits gain hopeful assurance that their efforts towards liberation will not be in vain. The Kingdom of God is already here, but not yet fully realized. The aim of a truly liberative social vision is to work in the service of this kingdom and towards its full realization.

The Problem with the Pathos Paradigms

Rajkumar summarizes the Dalit Christological project as a Christology 'predominantly articulated by accentuating the convergence of pathos experience of Jesus and the Dalits...the primary intention of those theologians who have dealt with Dalit Christology is to identify Jesus Christ as a God who participates in Dalitness.'⁹⁵ One could extend this definition to include also the general theological project of Dalit theology. With pathos as its epistemological starting point, Dalit theology has little difficulty in establishing the pathos pole of Dalitness and Dalit identity. It is shot through with pathos, but does its primacy on pathos obscure the second pole of Dalitness and Dalit identity: Dalit dignity and agency? Is Dalitness, here, ultimately reduced to pathos and passivity? In the pursuit of particularity, has one pole of Dalit identity eclipsed both the immediate second pole of identity and the general second pole of its theological project: the liberative social vision? Does Dalit theology have a pathos problem?

These questions are asked not to displace pathos' proper place in theological reflection, but are asked rather to discover its proper place. It is most certainly the

⁹⁵ Rajkumar, 'Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation,' 54.

appropriate jumping off point for Dalit theology; the problem arises when Dalit theology fails to make that leap. Suffering experiences are concrete, real, and certain. A liberative social vision, however, is less so. Its end is utopic, being simultaneously a good place (*eutopos*) and a no place (*utopos*), and is realized only through the process of its realization. One can describe its contours and its topography, but map is not territory. The ‘Wandering Aramean’ here functions not only as a means to access Dalit historical consciousness, but also describes well the process of accessing Dalit theology’s liberative vision. To arrive at the Promise Land, is to wander, perhaps wandering even to the point of wondering if this land will ever be reached, but it is never an aimless, directional-less wandering. Articulating a liberative social vision starts the walk; dialectically living out that liberative vision—testing it and refining it—helps that liberative social vision arrive at being a liberated society. For Dalit theology to achieve this liberated society, its liberative social vision needs to be incorporated more fully into its theological project. It needs to begin to ask the tough, if delicate questions, concerning pathos’ predominance in theological reflection.

Within Dalit theology, this process of critical reflection has begun to be undertaken by theologians like Clarke and Rajkumar. Both seek to reestablish the dialectical relationship between identity affirmation and liberative social vision in which each pole informs and corrects, if necessary, the other. As liberative social vision has been taken for granted, in the dual sense of being neglected and assumed, they begin with it. Clarke, a student of Nirmal, and Rajkumar, a student of Clarke, wonder why in twenty years and in thirty years, respectively, Dalit theology has had minimal impact within the Indian Church and Indian society. Their response is that an overemphasis on identity

affirmation, in particular *pathos* understood particularly through a Christian lens, has prevented a more liberating identity from being affirmed and stymied a liberative social vision from being enlivened.

Clarke's project seeks to re-contextualize Dalit Christian theology in the lived religiosity of Dalits themselves.⁹⁶ Clarke agrees with Nirmal that pathos should be Dalit theology's starting point, but whereas Nirmal moves directly from pathos to Dalit Christian Theology, Clarke moves from pathos to traditional Dalit religion prior to his arriving at Dalit Christian theology. By incorporating Dalit religion and culture, he advocates for the Dalit context to provide more than just pathos experience to theological reflection. Dalit worldviews, cultural symbols, and religious practices cannot be substituted for Christian conceptions, but rather they need to inform Christian theology. Traditional Dalit religiosity has sustained the Dalit communities, provided them with meaningful modes of protest, and nourished them in stultifying conditions for millennia. Christianity needs to hear and learn from them.

Clarke cites the influence of 'liberationism' on Nirmal's and other Dalit theologians' thinking as the reason for their failing to take seriously the symbols of traditional Dalit religion and culture by instead focusing on Christian-centric conceptions of God's liberating work.⁹⁷ He states:

⁹⁶ As outlined in *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* and 'Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence.' Sathianathan Clarke, 'Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence: a Contest Between Overpowering and Empowering Identities in Changing India,' *The Ecumenical Review* 54.3 (2002).

⁹⁷ Clarke defines 'liberationism' as being, 'simultaneously too narrow and too broad. It is too narrow because its focus is limited to the economic and social realms of life...what is hardly dealt with within this process of analysis are elements of religion and culture...' "liberationism" is too broad because it easily glosses over provincial and contextual complexities in its desire to project universal scope... "liberationism" tends to construct liberation in terms that find commonality with all oppressed communities throughout the world.' This critique mimics Nirmal's complaint against liberation theologies

My criticism of the epistemology of ‘liberationism’ can be restated in the following way: while it affirms that the experience pain-pathos is the source of knowledge about God, it fails to take seriously the symbolization of this experience of pain-pathos that is manifested in Dalit religion. Therefore, there is an unwillingness to work under the directives of its own epistemological presuppositions.⁹⁸

Clarke takes particular exception to the Exodus paradigm and the Deuteronomic Creed as their being incongruous with Dalit experiences of oppression and liberation. He states:

The notion of an all powerful God, who intervenes and completely reconfigures the world for the sake of the oppressed, does not find a dominant place in Dalit thinking and acting... There are no miraculous signs clearly disrupting the hierarchical and unequal social order in India. There is no spectacular parting of the seas; there is no drowning of the violating and violent ones who exploit and destroy the poor and the Dalits. To put it as starkly as possible, the dictum of God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ has remained quite sterile in terms of practical, concrete improvements in the structures of society for the good of the poor.⁹⁹

Clarke challenges Nirmal’s assertion that the Deuteronomic Creed provides a means for uncovering an authentic Dalit historical consciousness and, instead, argues that it presents an inauthentic and potentially repressive, if not oppressive, alternative. In waiting for signs and wonders, Dalits do just that, wait. When coupled with Rajkumar’s critique that this paradigm presents a conquering of Canaan that resembles too closely the Aryan invasion theory and creates a potential binarism—an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality—the Deuteronomic Creed does appear to be quite problematic. For Nirmal, the Creed contributes to identity affirmation. The liberative social vision remains absent. Its presence could demand for some adjustments to the paradigm—a greater emphasis on Dalit agency through cooperation in God’s liberative action—or it could call for its

failing to address the particularity of the Dalit context, but is here now directed against Nirmal himself. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 45.

⁹⁸ Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 47.

⁹⁹ Clarke, ‘Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence,’ 285-86.

dismissal on the grounds that it makes liberative partnerships difficult and that it reifies Dalit passivity. Regardless, the failure to incorporate a liberative social vision has resulted in Dalit theology's uncritical acceptance of this paradigm.

Whereas Clarke develops his criticism of the Deuteronomic Creed around Dalit theology's failure to address the Dalit context thoroughly in its particularity, Rajkumar's critique of the Suffering Servant paradigm calls for theologians to critically assess pathos as liberating starting point. Like Clarke, Rajkumar does not wish to excise pathos from identity affirmation, but in light of a liberative social vision, he does want to challenge paradigms that romanticize and ontologize pathos. He states:

Though this deliberate re-imagining of God as a servant God valorizes the Dalits and repositions their subjectivity as replicating Divine agency in the world, it also needs to be recognized that making inordinate hermeneutical purchase of this suffering-servant image could be counter-productive to practical liberation.¹⁰⁰

The problem arises if suffering becomes an ideal, something to be embraced rather than to be overcome. Though very much real, Dalit pathos is ultimately accidental; it is not essential to whom Dalits are. It defines them at particular place and a particular moment, but Dalit identity seeks to transcend pathos identity, first by awakening Dalit persons to their inherent dignity and then working to make this dignity realized concretely in their own lives and in their various contexts—their neighborhoods, villages, church, states, country, and the Church. Without a transformative liberative vision, pathos alone becomes realized. Dignity and humanity perhaps might be recognized, but never actualized in any meaningful way.

Both Clarke and Rajkumar offer important critiques of Dalit theology that emerge from within Dalit theology. Each finds Dalit theology wanting in following and fulfilling

¹⁰⁰ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 65.

its own directives, and for each the problem centers on pathos, albeit for different reasons. For Clarke, Dalit theology fails to incorporate traditional Dalit modes of dealing with and making sense of these pathos experiences. It is a failure to take seriously the true particularity of the Dalit context by replacing Dalit expressions with Christian, liberational ones. Rajkumar presents a more direct challenge to pathos based theologizing. Without a means to transcend pathos—for him a liberative social vision—Dalit theology remains stuck in a pathos thick discourse. Liberation may be spoken about, but only in vague generalities. Conversely, pathos is talked about with eloquent precision. He states:

An alternative framework for Dalit imagination of God will be one which is characterized by not *only* pathos, but will encompass elements of protest and resistance, which will place stress on questioning the perpetuation of the present status quo where Dalits are enslaved into accepting a slavish identity and which will be characterized by a radical discontinuity with the prevailing models.¹⁰¹

With Clarke as the generational bridge, Rajkumar and his colleagues advocate for a radical rethinking of Dalit theology that places a greater stress on a liberative social vision and actively seeks partners within the Church and beyond to help make this vision a reality. This openness presents an opportunity for Dalit theology to be critically engaged both from within and from without. Now is a moment of theological Dalit *glasnost*. The particularity of Dalit theology, pathos, need not be abandoned, but rather rethought. With an eye towards the possibilities that this openness presents and with a respect for the theological agenda that remains, Dalit theology may find it fruitful to enter into dialogue with non-Dalit and non-Christian theologies.

¹⁰¹ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 68.

Although Dalit theology has been open to establishing liberative partnerships ‘from all possible sources’¹⁰² and has the need for ‘alliances with other like-minded groups irrespective whether they are religious or secular; Dalit or not Dalit,’¹⁰³ the emphasis on the particularity of Dalit pathos can make such partnerships difficult to obtain and sustain.¹⁰⁴ The particularity of Dalit pathos should be affirmed; it needs to be affirmed. This affirmation, however, ought not come in the form of quantified qualification in which differentiation and particularity takes place by establishing a hierarchy of pathos. M. Shawn Copeland, writing on the particular suffering/pathos experiences of black women, states:

There can be no ranking of oppression or suffering; no men or women are excluded from the canon of anguish...I hope that the reader shall situate this particularizing of suffering within the ongoing Christian theological effort to respond to the human condition in new and graced ways.¹⁰⁵

The critique here points not to the methodological exclusivism present in Dalit theology—Dalit theology has begun to relax its exclusivity—but to the insistence within Dalit theology that Dalit suffering, in general, is greater and deeper than other groups, and Dalit Christian suffering, in particular, is the greatest. Such thinking is problematic on two-fronts. First, it is guilty precisely of the problem that Dalit theologians find in other contextual and liberation theologies: the attempt to speak about one context from another. Undoubtedly, Dalit pathos is particular; furthermore, it is deep and profound. However, the particularity of caste stigmatization and oppression only qualifies this

¹⁰² Nirmal, ‘Doing,’ 142, 143, quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 42.

¹⁰³ Godwin Shiri, ‘Peoples Movements—An Introspection as We Enter the 21st Century,’ *Religion & Society*, 43.1-2 (1996): 161. Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 42.

¹⁰⁴ Many Dalit theologians do participate in ETWOT functions, work in conjunction with Tribal theologians, and invite other contextual theologians to their conferences and seminars.

¹⁰⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, ‘Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in a Womanist Perspective,’ in ed. Emily M. Townes *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspective on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 110.

oppression, it does not quantify it. Secondly, the superlativizing of Dalit pathos isolates the Dalit community and the Dalit Christian community in particular. They become an island unto themselves, unable or unwilling to learn from and with other oppressed groups.

Such isolation, of course, breaks down in practice as demonstrated in Dalit theology's appropriation of methods and paradigms from other contextual and liberation theologies and movements. But as Clarke and Rajkumar critiques demonstrate, a simple appropriation of these borrowed tools results in an uncritical application of them. Reconceiving the Exodus paradigm as the Deuteronomic Creed only tangentially transforms the concept. A qualified rather than quantified assessment of its source of origin in relation to the Dalit context perhaps could have made Dalit theologians aware of the possible incongruities between this paradigm and the Dalit context. If asserting a quantified difference between Dalit pathos and other empathetic communities' pathos makes inter-Christian and inter-Dalit liberative partnerships difficult, Dalit theology's understanding and presentation of Hinduism makes inter-religious partnerships nearly impossible.

K.P. Aleaz and Michael Barnes, S.J. each challenge Dalit theology to rethink its understanding of Hinduism in order to move past a simplistic and/or ideological conflation of caste-based Brahmanism with Hinduism.¹⁰⁶ Dalit theology has a complicated relationship with Hinduism: textually, culturally, and ritually. Within

¹⁰⁶ K.P. Aleaz, 'In Quest of a Dalit Theology,' *Religion & Society* 49.2-3 (2004): 75-97; and 'The Convergence of Dalit-Advaitic Theologies: An Exploration,' *Indian Journal of Theology* 36.1 (1994): 97-108.

Michael Barnes, S.J., *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Hinduism, there are those ‘texts of terror’ that affirm the class, caste-system and the Dalits dislocated place outside of and within it. These texts also present Hindu deities, as Kancha Ilaiah states, as ‘Hindu Brahmanic “weapon wielders”...war heroes and mostly from wars conducted against Dalitbahujans.’¹⁰⁷ Culturally, Hinduism has maintained class, caste distinctions and has subjected Dalits to an oppressive social and economic existence on the margins of society. Ritually, Dalits have been forbidden to participate alongside class-caste Hindus, have been barred entry from temples, and prohibited to studying the Vedas. Dalit theology, however, acknowledges a class-caste counter tradition existing within Hinduism. The story of Śaṅkara challenged by and learning from a Dalit, reform-minded bhakti movements, nascent Hinduism, and Dalit saints like Chokhamela, do not allow for the easy and quick assessment that the entirety of the Hindu tradition is anti-Dalit. Dalit theology’s problem with ‘Hinduism’ is predominantly ideological and rhetorical; it is an essentialized reification of certain Brahmanical practices as being representational of Hinduism in general. This problem is further exacerbated by Dalit theology’s correct perception that Hinduism rather than traditional Dalit religiosity has informed Indian Christian theology’s process of inculturation.

Barnes provides a nuanced description of Dalit theology’s relationship with Hinduism and how this relates to the process of inculturation. Importantly and appropriately, Barnes does not dismiss Dalit theology’s criticisms of Indian Christian theology and Indian society as unfounded, but instead calls for a reevaluation of the origins and accuracy of its description of Hinduism. He states, ‘it easy to understand the rejection of a theology which by locking itself into the language of brahmanical religion

¹⁰⁷ Kancha Ilaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 2005), 100-101. Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Liberation and Dalit Theology*, 64.

has become detached from the justice issues which affect India society. Religion has often been used to entrench caste divisions.¹⁰⁸ For Barnes, Dalit theology, reverses—mimics?—Orientalism and encourages ‘oppositionalist thinking.’¹⁰⁹ Just as Orientalism reduced Indian religion to the ‘Big Tradition,’ Dalit theology conceives of Hinduism as being solely Sanskritic and high-caste. Unlike Orientalism, and hence the reversal, Dalit theology does not romanticize this limited conception of what Hinduism is, but embraces it ultimately to reject it. In its process of inculturation, Dalit Christian theology rejects traditional Indian Christian theology’s attempts at inculturation, and affirms its project as being the one, true way of inculturation—an assent arrived at by majority rule. To help overcome this oppositional dualism, Barnes presents a middle ground by understanding Indian religion as being neither solely Brahmanical Hinduism nor only Dalit popular religion, but rather possessing both elements along with a rich spectrum of traditions between them.¹¹⁰

Barnes makes clear the complexity of this situation and rightly locates Dalit theologians as the necessary agents of negotiation and dialogue—intercultural, interreligious, intra-cultural, intra-religious—in this context, perhaps granting more agency to Dalits in the Church than they themselves think they possess. Though he does not use the language, Barnes is pointing to the need for an operational liberative social vision. He states that the emergence of Dalit theology ‘raises awkward questions about

¹⁰⁸ Barnes, 171. The one criticism I have of Barnes’ depiction of Dalit theology is that he does not quite appreciate the depth of Dalit *pathos*. He states, ‘A great deal of attention is paid to social analysis and the recounting of particular stories and incidents which illustrate the dalits’ sense of grievance,’ and later, ‘is it inevitable that the subtle systemic violence of the Brahminically dominated caste society must come up against the more manifest violence of dalit insurgency.’ ‘Grievance’ might be a polite and political understatement, but ‘subtle’ betrays the ‘manifest violence’ that Dalits do experience and that are captured in ‘social analysis’ and ‘stories.’ Ibid., 170, 172.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 171.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 173.

the various responsibilities of the theologians.¹¹¹ As an Indian Dalit Christian theologian—that is a theologian who is a Dalit/Dalit sympathizer and a Christian reflecting in and upon the Indian context—s/he has a responsibility to the Dalit community to work towards a theology that promotes liberation and meaning for the Dalits and Dalit Christians. S/he also has a responsibility to the broader Church, Dalits and non-Dalit Christians, articulating a theology that proclaims good news to this fractured community. Finally, in the even broader Indian context, s/he has a responsibility to present to Indian society the Indian Church in its spiritual and ethical fullness, and, conversely, s/he has the responsibility to present Indian society to the Indian Church in a faithful manner.

The awkwardness arises in negotiating the particular needs and demands of each group at each level, even more so when these seem at odds with one another. To whom does the theologian owe allegiance? Dalit theology has primarily operated with the assumption that, along with God, Dalit theologians' first allegiance is to the Dalit Christian community, and then this allegiance spirals out to include non-Christian Dalits, non-Dalit Christians, and non-Dalit non-Christians. In this framework, the needs of those closer to the center take precedence over the needs of those on periphery. It is a simple rubric to apply, but its application can have problematic consequence. Without an integrative, liberative social vision, nothing protects Dalit theology from itself. That is nothing prevents it from becoming purely ideological and thus ineffectual in actualizing its ends.

Theological, ecclesial, and societal transformations require partnerships if transformation is going to be something more than negation and isolation. Dalit theology

¹¹¹ Ibid., 170.

need not become any less radical or prophetic to achieve its ends; it need only be willing to turn a critically reflective eye upon itself. Dialogue partners, intra- and inter-religious, can help to ensure that Dalit theology offers something beyond an internal monologue. With respects to Hinduism, Dalit theology could adopt a hermeneutic of generosity alongside its hermeneutic of pathos. Again this need not temper its critique of Brahmanical Hinduism and Indian society, but rather reserve its fierce critique for aspects of tradition deserving such condemnation, while also, perhaps, being open to finding liberative partners within a tradition no longer viewed as singularly oppressive.

The above critiques of Dalit theology—its initial failure to incorporate traditional Dalit religiosity, its possibly problematic relationship with pathos, its move to constantly qualify itself by its quantity of pathos, and its reified projection of Hinduism—demonstrate the inherent complexity of Dalit theology (that it is a theology about Dalits, for Dalits, by Dalits, but also more than that) and the need for a more robust vision regarding its ends. Identity affirmation, particularity pathos-based identity affirmation, has steered Dalit theology's course from the beginning. Judging by the questions and concerns of current Dalit theologians, one would be justified in concluding that a Dalit theology grounded solely in pathos experience insufficiently meets the needs of Dalits, the Church, and the nation. Pathos has a place, a central one, but it requires its dialectic partner: a liberative social vision.

Given these criticisms and their origin in an underdeveloped liberative social vision, Rajkumar's observation is not surprising. He states:

The contours of the *liberative social vision* of Dalit theology and the agency for that vision can be discerned in all those articulations which have called for a socio-political involvement in the Dalit issue. With regard to this some of the issues which have received attention were the struggles for securing protective

discrimination in the form of Scheduled Caste benefits to Christian Dalits, as well as the challenge of overcoming caste discrimination within the Churches. However, Dalit theology has just *mentioned* these two issues consistently. Not much theological reflection has been done upon these issues.¹¹²

Unsurprisingly, in the sixteen pages that Rajkumar devotes to reviewing the first generation's articulation of Dalit theology's two poles, only four deal explicitly with the liberative social vision. And of those four, half are dedicated to the charge of non-Dalit Christians to participate in Dalit liberation. Nirmal, from whom Rajkumar gets this particular phrase 'liberative social vision,' states:

Moving forward from pathos to history, Dalit theology must also 'see' a transforming liberative social vision. The greatest dalit leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar wanted such a liberative social to be based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Such a liberating social vision must transform our social structures and make them egalitarian. A vision of Dalit Theology must also transform our ecclesiastical structures and must strive to usher in God's *shalom*.¹¹³

This paragraph concludes Nirmal's section on liberative social vision as well as his essay "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective.' It is also Nirmal's final and only word on the character of this liberative social vision. Though perhaps implied in his later work, certainly Dalit agency presupposes a plan of action even if that plan remains under-defined, this is his definitive statement on the matter. It is not nothing. Nirmal describes it as 'transforming,' as being rooted in Ambedkar's Enlightenment ideals of liberty; equality; and fraternity, as being directed towards social and ecclesiastical structures, and as cooperatively bringing about God's *shalom*. Absent here and in subsequent works of Dalit theology is a plan of action that works towards the realization of this liberative social vision.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 54.

¹¹³ Nirmal, 'Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,' 144.

¹¹⁴ Rajkumar does offer a more developed program grounded in a Dalit exegesis of the Jesus' healing miracles.

Perhaps first generation Dalit theologians presumed that the affirmation of Dalit identity would naturally lead to the realization of a liberative social vision. Dalits, now actualized agents of action, conscious of their condition and the systems that maintain it, would organically bring about societal and ecclesial transformation. That once a critical mass of conscientized persons was reached, reforms would sweep through the Indian Church and the Indian nation. Thirty years have passed, and only modest, but nonetheless critical, gains have been achieved. Identity affirmation remains only partially fulfilled, despite a great percentage of Dalit theological reflection being dedicated to its realization. Without a proper program, without a developed, integrative, and liberative social vision, Dalit theology, much like the identity and society it seeks to make real, is caught between the already and the not yet. In this vacuum, new angles can be pursued. What follows is one such attempt.

Moving Forward: Dalit Theology in a Comparative Key

Following Rajkumar, the way forward will necessarily involve Dalit theology's restoration of the dialectic relationship between identity affirmation and a liberative social vision. With respects to the former, the program of conscientization first established in the Maharashtran Movement and later developed through a Christian lens in Dalit theology will remain central. The awakening to Dalit pathos, the recognition of the systems of oppression that perpetuate this pathos, and the actualization of Dalit agency, humanity, and dignity realized in the affirmation that Dalits are created in the image of God is how Dalit identity affirmation is understood here. Regarding the latter, a liberative social vision again will seek to transform Indian ecclesial and societal

structures, working towards the establishment of just and egalitarian relationships and institutions. The starting point for this work will continue to be Dalit persons and their experiences of caste stigmatization and oppression within the Church and within society. All that will be altered between this new method of Dalit theology and previous methods will be that this liberative social vision will directly contribute to the development of Dalit theology. It will not stand outside idly, waiting for its realization, or better, the Church—Dalit and non-Dalit Christians—will not passively await its realization. They will be active cooperators in the process of its realization.

Dalit theology, like many other contextual and liberation theologies, begins with the person. A robust theological anthropology is essential for these theologies to thrive. Without it, theological claims remain empty or incomplete. To say that Dalit persons are fully human, full of dignity, and created in the image of God, does not necessarily mean that this identity is affirmed in any actual or meaningful way. For it to have a transformative and empowering meaning, it needs to become a known identity, a realized identity. Essential for this actualization—a more correct description of this process than transformation—is the ontological reality that Dalits are always created in the image of God. This reality is not a secondary attribution or an accidental qualification. Dalits do not achieve or gain this identity; they possess it from the beginning. Pathos, while very much real, however, is not essential to Dalitness. It is a secondary attribute that enjoys methodological primacy because it helps differentiate the Dalit context from all other contexts. This does not mean that pathos should not be the starting point of Dalit theology. However, this does mean that a romanticized and

ontologized conception of Dalit pathos has no place in a truly liberative Dalit theology.

Pathos is to be recognized and overcome, it is not to be reified and essentialized.

Here a liberative social vision attends first to healing the ‘wounded Dalit psyche’ that results from Dalits’ interiorizing an inferiority-conscious imposed upon them externally.¹¹⁵ This healing occurs through a Dalit assent to their humanity and dignity and a rejection of all wound-inflicting identities. *Pathos* identity, when uncoupled from Dalit liberative agency, must also be recognized as potentially wound-inflicting. So long as Dalits remain passive participants in *pathos* they remain objects of history—subjects only in their subjective experiences of subjugation. To become true subjects, i.e. active agents in societal and ecclesial transformation, they must participate in and, necessarily, be allowed to participate in liberative praxis. As Rajkumar states:

The very fact that Dalits constitute the majority of the Indian Church, which makes their role in the Church’s praxis crucial, is not adequately recognized. Therefore, nothing much has been said about the role of the Dalits in their own liberation. One cursory glance at Dalit theology helps us recognize that no paradigm for praxis has been delineated to enthuse the Dalits to work towards liberation along with the non-Dalits. It is this failure to recognize and articulate relevantly the agency of Dalits for liberation which needs to be subverted if praxis is to become pragmatic.¹¹⁶

Rajkumar directs this critique towards both the Indian Church and Dalit theology.

Paternalism operates on each front and, echoing Clarke’s critique, prevents Dalits from participating in either the Indian Church or Dalit theology.

A final critique that Rajkumar offers is to question whether, ‘dalit theology offer[s] an ethical model which will challenge both the Dalits and their oppressors to act

¹¹⁵ M. Azariah, ‘The Church’s Healing Ministry to the Dalits,’ in *Indigenous People*. Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 55.

¹¹⁶ Rajkumar, *Dalit Liberation and Dalit Theology*, 60-61.

towards Dalit emancipation?’¹¹⁷ Here he calls for a ‘bipolar conversion of perspective’, which is a ‘change in attitude...between two poles—the oppressors and the oppressed.’¹¹⁸ Dalit theology can assist in this process of bipolar conversion. For Dalits, the oppressed, it presents an opportunity to breakout from a denigrating identity, affirm a humanizing one, and participate in the struggle for their own liberation. For the oppressor, it allows an opportunity to encounter their role in Dalit oppression, either by commission or omission, and to become co-workers in ushering in a liberated society.¹¹⁹ This bipolar conversion of perspective fosters liberative partnerships between Dalits and non-Dalits. For these liberative partnerships to make a liberative social vision real, the oppressors must be open to such partnerships, but the impetus for their formation must arise out the Dalit communities themselves. Non-Dalits can participate in, and even inform, the process of Dalit liberation, but only through a bottom-up movement, can this end be realized.

Perhaps here Nirmal’s ‘Suffering Servant’ paradigm can be reconfigured. It is unfortunate that the humanizing, liberative efforts of Dalit theology must necessarily begin from the bottom rather than be enacted from the top. Cooperation from the very beginning would be ideal; however, thirty years have demonstrated that Dalit theology has been fairly ineffective at inducing a cooperative, let alone top-down revolution. Similarly, three decades of poignant and directed critique has resulted in little self-critical inquiry by non-Dalit Indian Christian theology. But as Dalit agency remains essential to Dalit identity affirmation and to enlivening a liberative social vision, it is appropriate that Dalits themselves be the catalyst for social and ecclesial change. Service here then is understood to be Dalit agency in service to Dalit liberation. Such service does not reify

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 68.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 68-69.

Dalit and non-Dalit conceptions of traditional Dalit servant-hood, but instead subverts them. This service affirms Dalit pathos and historical consciousness, reconfigures an important, if problematic paradigm in Dalit theology, asserts Dalit agency, and strives for a liberative social vision. Furthermore, it reveals that Dalits are created in the *imago Dei* through their participation in Christ's service of ushering in the Kingdom of God, and rejects the potentially harmful assertion that God is created in the image of the Dalit.

Though not explicit yet, much of this rethinking of Dalit theology especially in relation to identity, service, and liberative social vision has come through a comparative theological engagement with the writings of the Hindu social reformer Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda's project will be unpacked in the next chapter, and its possible contributions for Dalit theology will be explored in the chapter after that. However, the practical implications of adopting a comparative methodology which critically and reflectively engages the Hindu tradition—here a particular Hindu tradition that is more sympathetic than it is antagonistic to the Dalit agenda—extends potential liberative partnerships beyond Christian boundaries. Though Dalit engagement with the Hindu tradition has routinely been polemical, especially in the reduction of Hinduism to caste-centered Brahmanism, even the more radical Dalit theologians like K. Wilson recognize the potential for partnerships. He states:

Today, we witness two streams of thought in Hindu tradition. On one hand the Sanathana Hindu forces are trying to take us back to the ancient dead past and the renaissance Hindu movements are struggling to lead us to a not-yet-realized humanized future. The Dalit Christians should guard themselves against judging Indian society purely on the basis of the decaying fanatic world-views and leaving aside several promising and emerging forces. It is time that the Dalit as well as the non-Dalit, authentic Christians, nascent Hindus, reformed Muslims, and the

humanistic forces from various other Faiths and ideologies get united on a human platform and hasten the process of establishing a humane culture.¹²⁰

If liberative partnerships can be forged in such away that would allow Hinduism to contribute to and support Dalit theology's own self-understanding and, conversely, Dalit theology could aid in Hinduism self-understanding, perhaps cultural, societal, and religious transformation is closer on the horizon than previously expected.

Conclusion

The first half of this chapter presented a historical survey of the Indian Christian context from which Dalit theology emerged. In recognizing the disconnect between the theology being produced and the lived reality of the Church's Dalit majority, Dalit theology offered a corrective that moved away from 'traditional' modes of reflection that incorporated high-caste Hindu texts and experiences and towards a rootedness in the pathos experiences of Dalit persons and communities. With this foundation and through this lens, Dalit theology worked towards affirming a humanizing identity by developing a historical and critical consciousness. The Deuteronomic Creed offered one biblical paradigm that spoke to the Dalit experience of being a 'no people' and becoming 'God's people' through conversion. It also presented the liberative identity hoped to be realized, the *imago Dei*. The Suffering Servant provided a second paradigm. Through it, Dalits encounter a God intimately familiar with *pathos*, and so know a God capable of leading them to liberation just as Christ conquered death on the cross.

The second half of this chapter presented the ways in which the present generation of Dalit theologians have begun to problematize the primary place pathos

¹²⁰ K. Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture,' 168. Wilson remains susceptible to a reified understanding of Hinduism, as well as Islam, in which modern conceptualizations of these traditions are liberative, whereas everything not modern, i.e. 'ancient,' are oppressive.

enjoys. While they concur with the first generation that pathos is to be the starting point, they call for new and more liberative identities and social visions capable not only of articulating pathos, but overcoming it as well. Here the protest dimension of Dalit identity needs to be affirmed as well as an emphasis on Dalit agency. In accord with Clarke and Rajkumar, I conclude that the way forward necessitates the restoration of the dialectic between identity affirmation and liberative social vision. In the final section of the chapter, I presented some preliminary ideas on how Dalit theology might benefit from doing theology in comparative key. It is just the beginning of a sketch—how might service be rethought, what might the *imago Dei* recovered so as to be an uncovered. As Dalit theology looks to form liberative partnerships amongst Dalit and non-Dalit persons and communities, I proposed Swami Vivekananda to be one such potential partner. The next chapter will introduce Vivekananda and his understanding of Practical Vedanta, which seeks to make the social spiritual and the spiritual social.

Chapter Three

Swami Vivekananda's Practical and Synthetic Vedanta

Introduction

One cannot underestimate the impact Swami Vivekananda has had upon the modern understanding of Hinduism. As Ninian Smart states, 'not only did he interpret Hinduism to the West so eloquently, but he also interpreted it to India itself.'¹ Likewise Agehananda Bharati writes, 'modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly.'² Although he is not the Father of Modern India, an honorific often reserved from Rammohan Roy, he is in many ways the father of the modern idea of Hinduism.³ Both his presentation of Hinduism to the West and in India and, equally significant, the reception and promulgation of his teachings contributed to a narrowed conception of what constituted authentic Hinduism: a philosophically oriented religion centered upon Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta.⁴ Anantanand Rambachan describes Vivekananda's impact as being 'so pervasive that it is a difficult task to identify and

¹ Ninian Smart, 'Swami Vivekananda as a Philosopher,' in *Swami Vivekananda in East and West*, eds. Swami Ghanananda and Geoffrey Parrinder (London: Ramkrishna Vedanta Centre, 1968), 82-83. Quoted in Anantanand Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of the Vedas* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 6.

² Agehananda Bharati, 'The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970): 278. Quoted in Rambachan, *Limits of Scripture*, 7.

³ Though one should keep in mind that even fathers have fathers. Vivekananda gained public attention at a moment when the Western public's familiarity with the subcontinent was at an historically all time high. Colonialism, missionary endeavors, and publications like Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East* granted access, albeit specific and limited, to the ideas of Hinduism. Vivekananda was as much shaped by this understanding of Hinduism as he helped shape it.

⁴ In his efforts to rectify the neglect of Bhedābheda (difference and non-difference) Vedānta and Vijñānabhikṣu in Vedānta scholarship, Andrew Nicholson states, 'this neglect of Vijñānabhikṣu's early works is one symptom of a wider neglect of Bhedābheda Vedānta by modern scholars. Perhaps the greatest single cause of this has been the claim in the 20th century by many Indian nationalists (e.g., Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan) and western orientalists (e.g., Deussen and Gough) that Advaita Vedānta is *the* authentic philosophy of India.' Vivekananda influenced not only the popular understanding of Hinduism, but also the academic study of the tradition. Andrew Nicholson, 'Reconciling Dualism and non-Dualism: Three Arguments in Vijñānabhikṣu's Bhedābheda Vedānta,' *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 35 (2007): 373.

extricate the individual elements that he contributed to the contemporary understanding of Hinduism. Not only did he largely formulate this interpretation, but he also gave it in the language in which it is articulated.’⁵ The aim of this chapter is to recover Swami Vivekananda’s understanding of Vedānta in its practical and synthetic form and critically assess the continued, often hagiographical, perception that his thought is synonymous with Śaṅkara’s Advaita Vedānta. As will be seen, Vivekananda did have a great affinity for Śaṅkara and Advaita, but he recognized the limitations that a strict adherence to both would have upon his own his project.

Vivekananda died at the age of thirty-nine. Despite the shortness of his years, he produced a remarkable body of work—his *Complete Works* spans nine volumes. This output results from his being a prodigious and gifted writer, orator, and epistler. However, Vivekananda was not an overly systematic thinker. His interests were broad, and he felt comfortable commenting or expounding upon topics that he had in one fashion or another—by glance or gaze—come to know. He was also constantly aware of his diverse audiences, and focused on his particular context rather than articulating a common, general program when addressing them. From parlors in New England filled with society women to platforms erected adjacent to temples in India, Vivekananda tailored his addresses to meet the needs, and often expectations, of his audiences. The genre, his erudition, confidence, and location all contribute to the unsystematic approach to his broad discourse. While one may conjecture as to whether he would have developed a more coherent system later in his life, the ‘eclecticism’ of his methodology and the pragmatism of his rhetorical approach make the present task of identifying a single thread that runs through all his thought difficult. Rather than attempting to force a system upon

⁵Rambachan, *Limits of Scripture*, 7.

Vivekananda, one is better served tracing a program that developed in his thinking as he crossed continents and as the vision for his community, India, and the world matured.

In light of the diversity present in the materials Vivekananda brings together to craft his particular message, Brian Hatcher identifies his method as eclectic. While ‘eclecticism’ might possess a negative connotation, Hatcher employs it in a neutral way. He states:

Anyone even remotely familiar with the writings of Rammohun, Keshub, or Vivekananda—not to mention the religio-political rhetoric of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan—will undoubtedly have been struck by how freely and confidently they construct their religious philosophies from the full range of the world’s religious wisdom. In the most fundamental sense, this is what I call their eclecticism.⁶

Several factors contribute to eclecticism being a defining feature of 19th c. Indian thought. The growing nationalist movement and the view that Hinduism could be a unifying force in a country as geographically, linguistically, and culturally diverse as India generated a greater sense of freedom for movement amongst Hinduism’s many philosophical schools and devotional sects leading to an intra-Hindu eclecticism. The cosmopolitan vibrancy of expedient travel and communication not only of persons but also of ideas created fecund ground for cross-cultural exchange and appropriation. The presence and challenges of Christian missionaries and European culture further encouraged individuals like Vivekananda to engage in a critical reflection of their own traditions and cultures in light of and in response to such encounters. If understood as a pragmatic approach to the context and content of the day, a tension in the eclectic can be maintained that recognizes the diversity of traditions brought together but avoids reducing this aggregation to being something simply arbitrary and artificial.

⁶ Brian A. Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4

In situating Vivekananda's eclecticism within his pragmatism, Hatcher states:

Confronted with the task of challenging the norms of religion and society in India and propagating a universalist Hinduism for the spiritual regeneration of the entire world, his interpretive rules of thumb were not validated by painstaking correspondence with a given system of epistemology or metaphysics. They were generated out of the very pragmatics of his life and preaching.⁷

Hatcher offers another important insight into Vivekananda. Rather than striving for systematic consistency throughout his many diverse engagements—whirlwind tours seem appropriate for a cyclonic swami—Vivekananda instead draws upon a vast body of spiritual and worldly resources to support his program of social uplift. However, what Hatcher calls pragmatic Wilhelm Halbfass identifies as 'rhetorical.' Commenting upon Vivekananda's differing presentations of Buddhism in the United States and in India—the former more positive than latter more guarded—as well as his public statements warning against Tantrism and his private acceptance and valuing of the tradition, Halbfass states, 'Vivekananda's comments contain elements that are essentially rhetorical... composed with strategic and tactical considerations in mind, and paid heed to the occasion and the expectations of his listener.'⁸ While Hatcher's 'pragmatic' allows Vivekananda to be less systematically rigorous in order to address his diverse audiences and concerns, especially the welfare of India's poor masses, Halbfass' 'rhetorical' could slip into simple, empty equivocation. Halbfass' second instance of 'rhetorical' is thus important for determining if a piecemeal foundation for Vivekananda's ethics ends either in incoherence or coalescence. He states:

There is no single or unified foundation of ethics in Vivekananda's thought. Instead, several motives appear in juxtaposition. Often, one or another is taken up for tactical or rhetorical purposes, in accordance with a particular audience; and

⁷ Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, 69.

⁸ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 235.

the fact that *one* viewpoint is occasionally given more emphasis than another by no means implies that it alone is of central importance.⁹

The hermeneutical key to interpreting and understanding Vivekananda is to determine his starting place. Halbfass concludes the above quotation noting that, ‘*one* single event was not enough to bring Vivekananda onto the path of “practical Vedānta.”’¹⁰ If one understands his arc to be from gradually realizing the need of something like a ‘practical Vedānta’ to developing this Practical Vedānta and then finally implementing and disseminating it, one can see Vivekananda’s dialectical thinking as originating in the experience of a particular problem—Indian poverty—and in the search of a means to respond to it. This reading cannot avoid a critical assessment of practical Vedānta both in its philosophical and theological presentation as well as its relationship to pre-modern schools of Vedānta—especially Śaṅkara’s. However, this assessment ought not be the sole grounds for appreciating Vivekananda. As Halbfass states, ‘it would not be appropriate to judge Vivekananda’s achievements primarily against the standards set by the teachings and the intellectual level of Śaṅkara.’¹¹ Much of the criticism directed towards Vivekananda approaches his thinking primarily as it relates to pre-modern forms of Hinduism. Such a lens is good and necessary, and all the more so as it takes seriously the task of fleshing of the ‘Vedānta-ness’ of his practical Vedānta and fills a lacuna in its popular reception. Nevertheless, the practical dimension of his thinking cannot be abandoned in pursuit of the speculative. How he developed his practical Vedānta should not be separated from the why.

⁹ Ibid., 240. Halbfass is here referring to the influence of Schopenhauer and Deussen’s *tat tvam asi* ethic upon Vivekananda’s thinking. While noting its pivotal role in his thinking, Halbfass does not believe, contra Hacker, that it is the only foundation of Vivekananda’s ethics. The *tat tvam asi* ethic will be discussed in more detail below.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 242.

Swami Vivekananda: Biographical Sketch

As is often the case with social, political, or religious figures, discovering the person behind the persona can be a challenging task. And all the more so when that person, like Swami Vivekananda, inhabited only then to transcend such spheres. The general facts of his life—dates and places—can be easily surmised. However, such details provide only the bare bones of his life. They supply the when and the where, but the why, the how, and especially the who still all need to be fleshed out and understood. In this process, the objective necessarily becomes subjective through interpretation. The life of Swami Vivekananda has been told, examined, and critiqued numerous times through a kaleidoscope of interpretive lenses. These approaches include the reverential and hagiographical,¹² the psychological,¹³ the intellectual,¹⁴ and the corrective.¹⁵ Each lens

¹² See His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1965), Christopher Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), Swami Gambhirananda, *The History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957). The reverential and hagiographic may tend towards devotional bias and a pious presentation of Vivekananda, but without it one gets little sense of the charisma and holiness he embodied.

¹³ See, George M. Williams, 'Swami Vivekananda: Archetypal Hero or Doubting Saint?' in ed. Robert D. Baird, *Religion in Modern India*, (Manohar: Manohar Publishing, 1989). Williams brief essay focuses especially on the role that Vivekananda's spiritual and existential angst played in the development of his thought. Williams' work could be understood as a corrective to the hagiographic biographies of Vivekananda. He describes his project as 'penetrat[ing] through dual consideration of the hero legend created by well-meaning followers, and of the camouflaging effect created by Vivekananda himself as he changed his pattern of ultimate concern during his lifetime. The contention of this study is that the practice of fitting Swami Vivekananda into a Hindu hero archetype has been costly for those who wish to know about the human quest for meaning and purpose in the life of the individual.' Ibid., 313. David Kopf also utilizes the psychological and psychoanalytical in his study of the Bengali intelligentsia and the Brāhmo Samaj. Here he brings in the work of Erik Erikson and his notion of identity crisis to understand the modernizing tendencies of the *bhadralok*. Kopf also acknowledges the limitations of this method. See David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 89-92. While the psychological may provide critical insights into the psyche of the individual or collective movement, it ought not serve the theory underpinning the analysis over the person or persons being analyzed.

¹⁴ See Gwilym Beckerlegge, *The Ramakrishna Mission: The Making of a Modern Hindu Thought* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service: A Study of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); Paul Hacker, 'Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics,' in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); Wilhelm Halbfass *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988); Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna*

has its own strengths and weaknesses, and while the subject of biography can never be reduced simply to an object of study, keeping these many approaches in tension with one another allows one to arrive asymptotically to a fuller understanding of the person. The following biographical sketch of Swami Vivekananda will draw upon these lenses and will focus especially on those details from his life that led up to and contributed to the construction of his Vedānta. They provide the raw material that Vivekananda would ultimately mold into his understanding of Vedānta while abroad and upon his return to the India.

Family and Schooling (1863 – 1881)

Before he took the name Swami Vivekananda, he was Narendranath Dutta. Born in 1863 in Shimla, Kolkata, Narendranath grew up in a well-to-do *kayastha* family. In Bengal the *kayastha jāti* was a prominent and respected caste that worked in such occupations as lawyers—like Vivekananda’s grandfather and father—government clerks, and in publication. Paul Hacker situates the *jāti* and the debate surrounding its *varṇa* classification well when he states, ‘the scribes of the princes used to be members of this caste. Accordingly, the Kayasthas view themselves as a subcaste of the nobility, the

Movement in the United States (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). The intellectual biography focuses especially on the development, influences, and contexts of Vivekananda’s thought. One could also add the scholarly, historical biography to this category, though it touches upon broader themes alongside the intellectual. See Amiya P. Sen, *Swami Vivekananda* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) and ‘Vedanta and the Revitalization of Indian Life,’ in *Hindu Revivalism in Bengal: 1872-1905: Some Essays in Interpretation* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ See Narasingha P. Sil, *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment*, (London: Associated University Press, 1997), as well as Sil, ‘Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Research: Hagiography Versus Hermeneutics,’ *Religious Studies Review* 27. 4 (2001) and ‘Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda,’ *Numen* 40. 1 (1993). The corrective biography aims to bring attention to the unrecognized presuppositions and biases operative in the reverential and hagiographic by highlighting the difficulties, inconsistencies, and contradictions smoothed over by these tradition-based treatments. At times the corrective can tend towards the provocative and antagonistic, but nevertheless it helps bring a fuller picture of Vivekananda through comparison and contrast.

Kshatriyas, although some accord them only the status of shudras.¹⁶ Traditionally a well-educated and highly literate caste, they were especially receptive to modern and Western education, participated in the various Bengali reform societies, and significantly contributed to the burgeoning Bengali Renaissance. Prior to becoming Swami Vivekananda, the trajectory of Naren's life followed rather conventionally the expectations and aspirations of many of his contemporary Kayasthas.

Biswanth Dutta, Naren's father, enjoyed a successful, self-made career. During Naren's youth, he worked outside of Bengal in Lucknow where he acquired a number of Muslim friends as well as a love for Persian poetry and Hindustani music.¹⁷ Upon returning to Calcutta, where he came to serve as an attorney at the High Court, he frequently entertained diverse audiences at his home as well as financially supported many of his relatives. Throughout his life, Biswanth remained a religious skeptic.¹⁸ Perhaps his own father's early renunciation at the age of 25 in which Durgacharan left

¹⁶ Paul Hacker, 'Vivekananda's Religious Nationalism,' in *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedanta*, ed. Wilhelm Halbfass (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995). The debate over the *kayastha's* true *varṇa* location emerged during Vivekananda's lifetime with the lead up to the 1901 census and continues even today. With respects to Vivekananda's familial context, Amiya Sen notes that along with Brahmins and Baidyas, the Kayasthas 'constituted the three most advanced castes.' Likewise, Brian Hatcher states that the *bhadralok*—'the "civilized" or "respectable" people'—was comprised often of high-caste persons, which included Brahmins and Kayasthas. Regarding *varṇa*, Vivekananda and Christopher Isherwood identify it as belonging to the Kshatriyas. Contemporary and modern critics, e.g. Sil, identify it is Śūdra. William Rowe provides an historical sketch of the Kayastha caste debate in Bengal during the late 19th century and early 20th century that helps situate Vivekananda's comments on his caste background. In the 1901 census, which saw the ranking of *jāti* groups, *Kayastha* was identified as Śūdra. The *Kayasthas* undertook a sustained campaign to be identified as Kshatriyas. Vivekananda's defense of his *varṇa* status, which includes also its rejection can be found in "My Plan of Campaign," (1897) *CWSV* 3.211. In one paragraph, Vivekananda affirms the appropriateness of his becoming a sannyasin, argues for the prestige of his Kayastha caste, rejects the significance of such status, acknowledges that his caste too has been guilty of oppression, and concludes with happily accepting the title Śūdra and even Pariah.

Sen, *Swami Vivekananda*; Brian Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism or the Faith of the Modern Vedantists: Rare Discourses from Early Colonial Bengal*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67. Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 186. William L. Rowe, 'Mobility in the Nineteenth-Century Caste System,' in ed. Milton Singer and Bernard S. Cohn, *Structure and Change in Indian Society* (Chicago: Aldine, 2007), 202. Sil, *Swami Vivekananda*, 68.

¹⁷ Sen, *Swami Vivekananda*, 19.

¹⁸ Abraham Stephen, *The Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2005), 8.

behind a promising law career as well as a young, now unsupported family, contributed to his skepticism. His childhood hardships may have also contributed to his charitable and compassionate character. When the young Naren challenged his father's indiscriminate giving, Biswanth responded, 'How can you understand the great misery of human life? When you realize it, you will sympathize with the poor creatures who try to forget their sorrows in the momentary oblivion obtained through intoxicants.'¹⁹ Unlike his father, Naren had yet to experience directly or indirectly the sufferings that accompanied life in India and the world. He lacked the empathy that experience bestows.

Bhuvaneswari Devi, Naren's mother, provided his earliest religious and secular education. Pious, possessing a remarkable memory and equally remarkable heart, she received elementary instruction in English from the European Zenana Mission. She introduced Naren to the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Puranas taking charge in his Hindu upbringing. In the biographical accounts emerging from the Ramakrishna community, she is depicted as ideal wife and mother. Christopher Isherwood states that she 'was a beautiful and stately Hindu lady of the old school; deeply devout.'²⁰ In the *Life of Swami Vivekananda* she is described as, 'graceful and devoted, expert in the management of household affairs...[she] cheerfully shouldered the responsibility of her husband's large family...[she] commanded the respect and veneration of all who came in contact with her.'²¹

The influence of both his parents would be formative in Vivekananda's social and spiritual development. In Biswanth, one finds a compassionate and generous heart as well as a skepticism that puts hard questions to received faith. In Bhuvaneswari, one can see a

¹⁹ His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 6.

²⁰ Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 187.

²¹ His Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 7.

strong person possessed of a keen mind and deep devotion. Vivekananda's is equally his father's and his mother's son, and without reducing his total formation to his parentage, George Williams, nevertheless, is correct to note the dialectical tensions present in his upbringing. His father's 'rational, progressive ideals' juxtaposed with his mother's 'traditional influence [that] would account for his attraction to more devotional aspects of the Hindu tradition' contributed to his early spiritual unrest, and perhaps even 'to a nervous breakdown.'²² Moreover, from this dialectical tension will emerge also an effort towards a synthetic reconciliation between the two. Vivekananda did not divorce the rational from the devotional nor the progressive from the traditional.

Accounts of Naren's early life display the comingling of the historical and the hagiographical in which youthful actions become imbued with theological import and providential character. He was born on a very auspicious day, the festival of Makrasamkranti, and was named Vireshwar in honor of Shiva to whom his mother had prayed for his birth. He was a personable, if also 'naughty' boy, who possessed a 'a great fancy for wandering monks.'²³ Spiritual enlightenment and experiences of bliss, deep devotion, and an unrelenting pursuit of truth, frequent these childhood narratives, and as Williams notes, 'there remains none of the documentation which would raise these stories to historicity or refute them as invention.'²⁴ Alongside these more spiritually-focused depictions, he is portrayed as a friendly, though strong-willed and quick tempered, child who enjoyed playing with his peers and sitting at the feet of the various scholars who visited his parents' home.

²² Williams, 'Svami Vivekananda,' 316.

²³ Ibid., 9-10. His naughtiness and the playful, loving reaction of his mother echoes Krishna's *lila* and his relationship to Yashoda. His delight in the company of and generosity towards monks points towards his own future renunciation.

²⁴ Williams, 'Svami Vivekananda,' 315.

At the age of eight, Naren began attending the Metropolitan Institute headed by the ‘Sanskrit pandit, reformer, and educator’ Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar.²⁵ While principal of the Sanskrit College, Vidyasagar had championed a more modern curriculum that brought Indian philosophy into direct dialogue with Western philosophy. David Knopf describes his reform efforts as, ‘ruthlessly accomplish[ing] what no Orientalist dared to try—he transformed the ritualistic corpus of Sanskrit learning into an updated and rational scheme of Sanskrit education.’²⁶ The program he adopted was not without its critics. Dr. J. R. Ballantyne from Benares Sanskrit College argued that students should be taught the two traditions separately so as ‘to determine for [themselves] whether the principles inculcated in these correspond to one another, or altogether conflict, or correspond partly.’²⁷

Vidyasagar defended his synthetic approach noting that ‘students wishing to transfer the Philosophy of the West into a native dress will possess a stock of technical words already to some degree familiar to intelligent natives’ as well as stating that ‘young men thus educated will be better able to expose the errors of ancient Hindu philosophy than if they were to derive their knowledge simply from European sources.’²⁸ When he founded the Metropolitan Institute, having resigned from all his previous posts following the failure of the government to provide funding to the schools for girls he established, Vidyasagar carried over with him this approach, which brought Western and Hindu

²⁵ Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism*, 5.

²⁶ Knopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and Modern India*, 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55. For Vidyasagar’s curriculum reform at Sanskrit College see Knopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and Modern India*, 54-59. For Vidyasagar’s contribution to modern Vedānta see Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism* and Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal*, (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1996). In the latter, Hatcher describes Vidyasagar’s program as bringing together ‘bourgeois and Brahminical educational ideologies within a Bengali idiom of moral pedagogy.’ *Ibid.*, 77. See also Sumit Sarkar, ‘Vidyasagar and Brahminical Society,’ in *Writing and Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

philosophy into dialogue in pursuit of a truth that transcends tradition and culture and worked for the improvement of India.²⁹ While Naren may have not grasped the true intent of the pedagogical mission underpinning the Metropolitan Institute during his years there, it helped shape the kind of interaction between the two traditions that he himself would soon undertake.

In 1879, Naren passed the entrance exam and began his studies at the prestigious Presidency College. After a year of course work, he experienced a nervous breakdown of sorts, and having recovered in Bodh Gaya, he continued his studies at the General Assembly's Institute (Scottish Church College) and graduated with his first arts degree in 1881 and passed his general examination in 1884.³⁰ Here he continued to study Western philosophy, and R. K. Das Gupta provides a long list of European figures Vivekananda would have read or with whom he would have been familiar. These include Plato, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Fichte, Bentham, Mill, Spencer, and Hume.³¹ While his home life and the modernized education he received molded and ably prepared Naren for his career in India and abroad, the relationship that developed between him and Ramakrishna over the next two years began to steer him away from his father's expectations—his becoming a lawyer and householder—and towards his becoming Swami Vivekananda.

²⁹ Sarkar, 'Vidyasagar,' 259.

³⁰ George Williams notes that the precise cause of this nervous breakdown remains unknown. Vivekananda himself admitted that his frequent absence from the College prevented him from advancing to the next grade, and his brother reports that the cause for these absences was a prolonged bout with malaria. Hal W. French, 'Swami Vivekananda's Experiences and Interpretations of Christianity,' in ed. Arvind Sharma, *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).

³¹ R. K. DasGupta, *Swami Vivekananda on Indian Philosophy and Literature*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1990), 166-70.

With the Brāhmos and Sri Ramakrishna (1881 – 1886)

At first blush, it would seem rather odd that young *bhadralok* men like Naren would seek out a person like Ramakrishna. Sumit Sarkar states:

There was a strange, sudden trek of Calcutta bhadralok in the late 1870s and the early 1880s to a man who seemed to represent the very opposite of all such valorizations and initiatives. Ramakrishna Paramahansa hitherto an obscure Dakineswar temple priest of humble village Brahman origin, had virtually no English, and not even much formal vernacular (or Sanskrit) schooling. He though little of rationalistic argument, considered organized efforts to improve social conditions futile, preached an apparently timeless message of *bhakti* in a rustic language, and claimed to have seen, many times, the Goddess Kali face to face.³²

Ramakrishna and his growing community of admirers and followers appeared to represent the antithesis of both the Bengali reform movements that had come before and what bhadralok society had come to expect of these college-aged men. There, in a northern, neighboring village, the young inheritors of modernity, the future for Bengal and India, were turning to a man whose person and teachings appeared to be very unmodern. What compelled them to visit and then to follow Ramakrishna?

The shift from Mughal rule to the British Raj following the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857 set in motion a series of economic and social changes that came to fruition in the following decades. Naren and his contemporaries found themselves in a bubble bursting; they were highly educated and prepared to enter into promising careers that ultimately never emerged.³³ Sarkar states, ‘English education brought reasonable success in professions and services for some, though even there the highest rungs would be

³² Sumit Sarkar, ‘Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times,’ in *Writing Social History*, 283.

³³ Hatcher captures the bhadralok sentiment prior to this bubble developing. He states, ‘in early colonial Bengal, English education was invested with a sense of great promise, it seemed to provide one grand avenue into opportunities in both public and private ventures. The *bhadralok* embodied this with a sense of promise, often couched in the terms of grand notions of progress and improvement.’ Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism*, 68. Naren and his contemporaries arrived when the faith in this inevitable project of progress and improvement began to waver in the face of the colonial social and economic realities.

occupied by Englishmen. For many more, it came to connote only humble clerical jobs (*chakri*) in government or mercantile offices, once again British-controlled.³⁴ Naren briefly held a clerk position in Namaichandra Basu's law office, but following the death of his father he had to attend to his family's economic hardships which were exacerbated by a familial lawsuit as well as his father's partner's dishonest borrowing practices. Plans to study law in England could have been realized had Naren agreed to marriage, but he had already firmly committed himself to life of chastity. Small jobs, including a short stint as a teacher at Vidyasagar's school, were infrequent and paid little. Such difficulties coupled with an unwillingness to pursue marriage as a financial recourse may have propelled Naren to Ramakrishna. However, to reduce this decision to the purely economic is an oversimplification.³⁵ Economic difficulties contributed to a broader social dissatisfaction that certain *bhadralok* sectors were experiencing in Bengal during Naren's early adulthood.³⁶

Like many of his contemporaries, Naren joined the Brāhmo Samaj, which by this time had twice splintered.³⁷ David Knopf outlines three key ideas present in the mission of the Brāhmo Samaj. He states:

³⁴ Sarkar, 'Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti,' 285.

³⁵ Narasingha Sil argues that Naren's decision to follow Ramakrishna was a career choice born from exhausted options. He states that it was 'chosen by default—when the life of a common householder with a normal secular profession seemed well-nigh impossible.' Sil, Swami *Vivekananda*, 43. Though Naren did have difficulties attaining a well-paid position, he could have alleviated some of these burdens by accepting marriage—even after his father's death.

³⁶ Sarkar does well in problematizing the perception that '*bhadralok*' constitutes an undifferentiated category. Tithi Bhattacharya and Hatcher further reveal the diversity present, especially class, in the community as well as its unifying elements—moral and educational. See Tithi Bhattacharya, *Sentinels of Culture: Class, Education, and the Colonial Intellectual in Bengal (1848-85)* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35-67 and Hatcher, *Bourgeois Hinduism*, 66-70.

³⁷ The first schism occurred in 1866 was generational between an older and more conservative element represented by Debendranath Tagore and a younger and more liberal body represented by Keshub Chunder Sen. The second schism occurred 1878 between Keshub Chunder Sen and the more progressive elements within Sen's original group represented by Shivanath Shastri. The progressive wing formed the Sadharan Brāhmo Samaj. Shastri had become critical of Sen's growing lack of commitment to social

The first was liberal religion, or the substitution of a rational faith for the prevailing popular religions of the world, which, they thought, increasingly curtailed the freedom of human beings by enslaving them to mechanical rituals, irrational myths, meaningless superstitions, and other-worldly beliefs and values. The second was the idea of social reform, or emancipation in which all known penalized classes and groupings such as workers, peasants, and women were to be elevated through education and the extension of civil rights to participate fully in the benefits of modern civilization. Finally, there was the idea of a universal theistic progress, or the notion that perfectibility of mankind could be achieved by joining social reform to rational religion.³⁸

The schisms that followed upon the Samaj's formation in 1839 resulted from the debate as how best interpret and implement this mission. Naren first joined the Sadharan Brāhmo Samaj then under the leadership of Shivanath Shastri and Vijay Krishna Goswami around 1879 and later, upon his return to Calcutta, joined Keshub Chunder Sen and the Adi Brāhmo Samaj's Band of Hope. Both groups were struggling with the rationalistic theism they had inherited from the original Brāhmo Samaj and its relationship with popular Hindu piety. Both also had begun to frequent Dakshineswar to visit Ramakrishna. The strict rationalism of Brāhmo theism was perhaps best suited to an era when progress and change seemed inevitable. Naren's generation, defined by stagnation and uncertainty, found little solace in its philosophical treatises. More than doctrine they wanted experience, to know but also to feel.³⁹ Ramakrishna promised such an experience, and he did so in a way that contrasted—though, importantly did not necessarily break—with Brāhmo teachings and appealed to the religious devotion of their youth. Sarkar states:

reform as well as the marriage of Sen's young daughter, which violated the Samaj's position on child marriage. Their critique echoed Sen's original, that the Samaj was at the service of the community and not an individual.

³⁸ Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj*, 3.

³⁹ Another key difference that would develop between the Sen's New Dispensation and the Sadharan Samaj would be the place of emotionalism within the groups. Sastri, though critical of Brāhmo rationalism, would not allow its total displacement by emotionalism. Sen, however, increasingly came to embrace the emotional and the ecstatic.

There was little obviously new in Ramakrishna's teachings. That may have been one of his strengths, for through Ramakrishna the city *bhadralok* could imagine themselves to be reaching back to lost traditional moorings in the countryside, in simple faith conveyed through rustic language. The central message was one of *bhakti*, valorizing, as *bhakti* has often done, quiet inner devotion over textual exegesis, time-consuming ritual, and external action. The catholicity of 'many views, many paths' (*yat mat, tato path*) which became one of Ramakrishna's principle titles to fame, also has many earlier—and nineteenth century—counterparts.⁴⁰

The *bhadralok* turned to Ramakrishna because he provided a needed change of scenery in the literal and a figurative sense. Travelling out of Calcutta allowed these young men to break from the tedium that accompanied low-salaried positions and underemployment and provided a refuge from familial expectations that were becoming more difficult to meet. Likewise, visiting Ramakrishna provided a chance to encounter the familiar in the strange. That many of the leaders of the Samaj too had decided to venture out for such audiences offered support for these excursions. However, for some individuals like Naren, a change in scenery would end in a life-changing experience.

According to the now familiar narrative of his turn to Ramakrishna, Naren had become increasingly troubled by his growing religious skepticism. The highly rationalistic theism that he had imbibed while a member of the Brāhmo Samaj provided little relief to his uncertainty.⁴¹ More than desiring a philosophical proof for God, he wanted to meet someone who had actually seen God. When he put such a question to Debendranth Tagore, which he had frequently asked of others, Tagore responded that he had not seen God. At the suggestion of Rev. William Hastie, his professor and the

⁴⁰ Sarkar, 'Kaliyuga, Chakri and Bhakti,' 288.

⁴¹ Brajendranth Seal, a fellow classmate, reveals Vivekananda's disposition at this time to be one of 'bitter intellectual cynicism...restlessness, and sardonic wit. Two philosophical problems plagued him deeply: the existence of God and the problem of evil.' B. N. Seal, 'A Fellow Student's Reminiscence: Swami Vivekananda,' paraphrased in Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and Modern India*, 204-5.

president of the Scottish Church College, Naren visited Ramakrishna. Describing that first encounter, he said:

From his spiritual words and ecstatic states he seemed to be a man of genuine renunciation and there was a marked consistency between his words and life. He used the most simple language, and I thought, 'Can this man be a great teacher?'—I crept near to him and asked him the question which I had asked so often: 'Have you seen God, sir?' 'Yes, I see him just as I see you here, only in a much intenser sense.' 'God can be realized,' he went on, 'one can see and talk to him as I am doing with you'...For the first time I found a man who dared to say that he had seen God, that religion was a reality to be felt, to be sensed in an infinitely more intense state than we can see the world...But I could not reconcile his strange conduct with me. So I concluded that he must be a monomaniac. Yet I could not help acknowledging the magnitude of his renunciation. 'He may be a madman,' I thought, 'but only the fortunate few can have such renunciation. Even if insane, this man is the holiest of the holy, a true saint, and for that alone he deserves reverential homage of mankind!' With such conflicting thoughts I bowed before him and begged his leave to return to Calcutta.⁴²

Naren's turn to Ramakrishna was gradual, and his encounters with him over the next four years were marked by both an unease with the attention and affection that Ramakrishna showered upon him and a deep attraction to the mystical priest. Naren frequently found Ramakrishna's actions toward him embarrassing and inappropriate.⁴³ However, despite this aversion he felt a strange and strong pull towards him. Through his touch, Ramakrishna was able to induce within Naren experiences of various states of *samādhi*, and though he at first he found such experiences unsettling, they had a

⁴² Eastern and Western Disciples, *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 47.

⁴³ Nearly all the biographic material present Naren being uncomfortable at first in the presence of Ramakrishna. Likewise, they reveal also Ramakrishna's own awareness of the perceived inappropriateness of his behavior. 'What will people think, seeing a man of my age weeping and pinning for a boy like him! With you, I don't feel ashamed of it—you are my very own. But what must others think? And yet I can't stop myself.' Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 202. Interpreting, and thus understanding Ramakrishna's behavior, has provided the field of religious studies an opportunity to reflect upon the questions of insider and outsider, the use of psychoanalysis, and the category of 'madness' in scholarship. Two pivotal texts in this conversation are Jeffry Kripal's *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* and the response to this text offered by Swami Tyagananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana in *Interpreting Ramakrishna: Kali's Child Revisited*.

profoundly transformative effect upon him.⁴⁴ As these moments of loss of consciousness became more intense, he would come to understand them to be experiences of revelation demonstrating the advaitic truth of the scriptures he had been studying.⁴⁵

Despite Naren's growing restlessness with Brāhmo theism, Ramakrishna perhaps underestimated the hold that certain Brāhmo biases had upon his now more frequent visitor. These prejudices were most prominent in Naren's reluctance to accept instruction

⁴⁴ During his second visit to Dakshineswar, Naren describes his first spiritual experience induced by Ramakrishna's touch. In his retelling one gets the sense of his unease as well as its transformative impact. He states, 'As soon as he saw me, he called me joyfully to him and made me sit down on one end of the bed. He was in a strange mood. He muttered something to himself which I couldn't understand, looked hard at me, then rose and approached me. I thought we were about to have another crazy scene. Scarcely had the thought passed through my mind before he placed his right foot on my body. Immediately, I had a wonderful experience. My eyes were wide open, and I saw that everything in the room, including the walls themselves, was whirling rapidly around and receding, and at the same time, it seemed to me that my consciousness of self, together with the entire universe, was about to vanish in a vast, all-devouring void. This destruction of my consciousness of self seemed to me to be the same thing as death. I felt that death was right before me, very close. Unable to control myself, I cried out loudly, "Ah, what are you doing to me? Don't you know I have my parents at home?" When the Master heard this, he gave a loud laugh. Then, touching my chest with his hand, he said, "All right—let it stop now. It needn't be done all at once. It will happen in its own good time." To my amazement, this extraordinary vision of mine vanished as suddenly as it had come. I returned to my normal state and saw things inside and outside the room standing stationary, as before. Although it has taken so much time to describe all this, it actually happened in only a few moments. And yet it changed my whole way of thinking. I was bewildered and kept trying to analyse what had happened. I had seen how this experience had begun and ended in obedience to the will of this extraordinary man. I had read about hypnotism in books and wondered if this was something of the same kind. But my heart refused to believe that it was... This man did not bewitch me or reduce me to his puppet. On the contrary, when I first met him, I had decided he was mad. Why then should I have suddenly found myself in this state? It seemed an utter mystery to me. But I determined to be on my guard, lest he should further influence over me in the future.' Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 197-98. A week later, and on guard, Naren returned only to experience a deeper loss of consciousness.

⁴⁵ Isherwood, 207. The importance of *anubhava* (experience) in Vivekananda's thinking has been taken up by Anantanand Rambachan in his *The Limits of Scripture: Vivekananda's Reinterpretation of Vedas*. Rambachan argues that for Vivekananda experience constitutes the sole source of valid knowledge in his Vedānta and thus reduces the status of *Śruti* (revealed scriptures, Vedas, Upaniṣads) to a source of knowledge that requires the validation of experience. This emphasis on experience over Scripture represents Vivekananda's break from Śaṅkara for whom Scripture is the sole valid means of knowledge (see Rambachan, *Accomplishing the Accomplished: The Vedas as a Source of Valid Knowledge in Śaṅkara*). Rambachan is correct in that Vivekananda argues that Scripture is validated in the experience, and should they lack the ability to create this experience, then they would not be Scriptures. Vivekananda possesses an *a posteriori* faith in the Scriptures rather than an *a priori* one, especially in his understanding of the historicity and thus temporality of *Śruti*. Scripture is not an eternally revealed word to be heard, but the product of *Rishis* who have experienced the truth and who have written it down to lead others to a similar experience. Though it may not bring Vivekananda completely in lines with Śaṅkara—of whom Vivekananda can be quite critical—Vivekananda does not appear to have either an a-textual or an extra-textual experience in mind. Rather it is an experience born from the text that validates the text as the above quotation shows.

in Advaita Vedānta and to worship the Goddess Kali. With regards to Advaita, both Williams and Gwilym Beckerlegge follow the account in *The Life of Swami Vivekananda* in which the authors state matter-of-factly that ‘to Narendra, a staunch adherent of the Brāhmo Samaj, these writings [*Ashtavakra Samhita* and other Advaita treatises] seemed heretical.’⁴⁶ For Naren, the problem with Advaita was that the non-dualistic recognition of all things as Brahman abolished the Brāhmo emphasis upon the transcendence of God. He states, ‘it is blasphemous, for there is no difference between such a philosophy and atheism. There is no greater sin in the world than to think of myself as identical with the Creator. I am God, you are God, these created things are God—what can be more absurd than this.’⁴⁷

Naren’s criticism of Advaita, however, did not stem from a straight Brāhmo critique of Vedānta, which tended to focus on Śaṅkara’s perceived ‘pessimistic view of life’ and the world.⁴⁸ In fact, the Brāhmo Samaj appealed to Advaita in order to assert that Hinduism properly understood was monotheistic and rejected image worship.⁴⁹ Instead, Naren’s issue with Advaita came from a misunderstanding of Advaita’s ontology that reduced and equated the divine with the material. He had conflated the essential with the accidental, which allowed the Brāhmo critique of popular Hindu devotionism to

⁴⁶ Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 64.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64-65. As his studies continued, Naren still lacked the ability to move beyond this position. In a conversation with his friend Hazra their speculation ends in ‘scornful laughter.’ ‘Can it be said that the waterpot is God, that the drinking vessel is God, that everything we see and all of us our God.’ Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 205.

⁴⁸ This Brāhmo critique can be found as early as Rammohan Roy and was championed in Vivekananda’s day by Shivanath Shastri and the Sadharan Brāhmo Samaj. They found Śaṅkara’s understanding of the illusory nature of the world—the relative truth of it in distinction to the ultimate truth of Brahman—to be antithetical to their social reform agenda.

⁴⁹ This appeal developed as a response to the Christian missionary challenge that Hinduism was polytheistic and idolatrous.

become also a critique of Advaita.⁵⁰ His hesitancy to worship Kali arose from a similar bias against a more sacramental conception of God/Goddess—a God/Goddess with form capable of being worshiped in an image. Neither Ramakrishna’s persistence in Naren’s study of Advaita nor his insistence that he turn to Kali could convince him to do either. Only an immediate experience of their truth could compel him, and here again Ramakrishna convinced him not with a word, but with a touch.⁵¹ Williams understands Naren’s willingness to worship Kali as the final step in his process of leaving the Brāhmos behind and becoming a true disciple of Ramakrishna. The impact Ramakrishna had upon his personal and spiritual life is clear, but how did Ramakrishna’s teachings contribute to the creation of Vivekananda’s Vedānta?

Alongside his ecstatic tendencies, Ramakrishna is perhaps best known for his catholicity and the eclectic practices that comprised his *sāadhanā*. He was taught *Tantric*

⁵⁰ Knopf notes that the ‘radical rationalism’ that manifested in certain Brāhmo sectors is the necessary vestige of Roy’s ‘attack on the excesses and abuses of popular Hinduism.’ Knopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of Modern India*, 76-7.

⁵¹ Having happened upon Naren jesting about the silliness of *Advaita*, Ramakrishna touched him and sent him into a state of samadhi. Naren states, ‘And then at the marvelous touch of the master, my mind underwent a complete revolution. I was aghast to realize that there really was nothing whatever in the universe but God...I sat down to eat, and I saw that everything—the plate, the food, my mother who was serving it and I myself—everything was God and nothing else but God...When I did at last return to normal consciousness I felt convinced that the state I had been in was a revelation of non-dualistic experience.’ Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 206-7. Naren’s acceptance of Kali came only during the last year of Ramakrishna’s life. It was preceded by an intimate and tear-filled exchange in which Ramakrishna revealed to Naren that he knew that he had come to do the Mother’s work. Later, with his family in dire straits, Naren decided that a prayer from Ramakrishna on his behalf would surely be answered. Instead, Ramakrishna encouraged him to pray to Kali himself, noting that Tuesday was especially auspicious. So he set out for the temple, with complete trust in Ramakrishna, though perhaps not in Kali. He sates, ‘about 9 o’clock the Master commanded me to go to the temple. As I went, I was filled with a divine intoxication. My feet were unsteady. My heart was leaping in anticipation of the joy of beholding the living Goddess and hearing her words. I was full of the idea. Reaching the temple, as I cast my eyes upon the image, I actually found that the Divine Mother was living and conscious, the Perennial Fountain of Divine Love and Beauty. I was caught in surging wave of devotion and love. In an ecstasy of joy I prostrated and prayed, ‘Mother, give me discrimination! Give me renunciation! Give unto me knowledge and devotion! Grant that I may have an uninterrupted vision of Thee!’ A serene peace reigned in my soul. The world was forgotten. Only the Divine Mother shone within my heart.’ Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 95. Not only did Naren experience the presence of Kali, but the prayer he had intended to pray—‘the removal of pecuniary wants’—had been transfigured into a prayer for discrimination and renunciation. Kali had conformed his will to hers.

Sāadhanā by Bhairavi Brahmani, undertook *Vaiṣṇava Sāadhanā* with the guidance of Jatadhari, and was initiated into the Puri order of advaitin sannyasins by Totapuri. He achieved the highest realization offered by each *sāadhanā* and would later extend his practices by incorporating Islam and Christianity.⁵² Alongside demonstrating that Ramakrishna was a spiritual adept, the openness to engage in such diverse practices points to his pursuit of God-realization by all the means available as well as his work to find a unified, divine reality that underpins all religions—the ultimate end is the same despite the means. Walter Neevel contends that the chronological and hierarchical arrangement of these practices and realizations is a later construction of biographers that ‘makes his *sāadhanā* progress through an ascending succession of “lower” dualistic disciplines towards a climax in the “highest,” non-dualistic realization.’⁵³ Isherwood clearly shows that Ramakrishna did not abandon his *bhakti* practices after having achieved *samādhi*. This return to *bhakti* follows Ramakrishna’s charge to Naren to worship Kali after already achieving non-dualistic realization.⁵⁴

That Ramakrishna would begin and conclude with *bhakti* is in accord with his understanding of Brahman to be both *saguṇa* (with qualities)—*līlā* (creative sport or play) in Ramakrishna’s vocabulary—and *nirguṇa* (without qualities)—*nitya* (immutable, constant). He describes the process of realization to be like staircase, a motif similar to

⁵² For an account of his *sadhana* training, see Isherwood, *Ramakrishna and His Disciples*, 84-141. This ordering follows closely the timeline of his training, but as K. P. S. Choudhary notes, they’re not neatly segmented. K. P. S. Choudhary, *Modern Indian Mysticism*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 93. Walter Neevel contends that

⁵³ Walter G. Neevel, Jr., ‘The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna,’ in ed. Bardwell L. Smith, *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 83.

⁵⁴ Ramakrishna’s instruction on how one ought to attain realization shows this movement from *Advaita* to *bhakti*. He states, ‘As long as one has not realized God one should renounce the world, following the process of “neti, neti.” But he who has attained God knows that it is God who become all this. Then he sees God, maya, living beings, and the universe from one whole.’ *Sri-Sri-Ramakrishna-Kathamrta* I, 180. Quoted in Choudhary, *Modern Indian Mysticism*, 105.

Vivekananda's ladder, in which one begins with *līlā* ascends to *nitya* and from *nitya* descends with a fuller understanding of *līlā*. The process of negation leads to affirmation upon the realization that Brahman without form is manifest with form in the entire created order. *Jñāna* (knowledge) of *nirguṇa* Brahman is the penultimate step; *vijñāna* (the experience of having that knowledge) is ultimate. Beckerlegge states:

Vijnana refers to that state of realization in which Brahman is seen in the midst of the world now regarded as the manifestation of Brahman, whereas jnana refers to the spiritual wisdom that leads through discrimination to the realization of Brahman by setting aside all else as maya [illusion].⁵⁵

The already/not yet of this understanding of Brahman will be central to Vivekananda's understanding of service as *sādhana*. Though one enters the practice without having realized Brahman, that the object of service is truly Brahman allows for this realization to be possible. The main difference between Vivekananda and Ramakrishna is that Vivekananda will add work, *karma yoga*, to the formula of *bhakti yoga* plus *jnana yoga*. Service to the poor is reconfigured as a practice of worship that leads to *jñāna* and culminates in *vijñāna*. It is renunciation, but a renunciation back into the world.

After Ramakrishna: The Math and Travels through India (1886 – 1892)

A few days prior to his death, Ramakrishna 'initiated' eleven of followers and commissioned Naren to 'teach my boys' and 'keep them together.' Half a year later, on Christmas Eve 1886, Naren brought these disciples together, distributed ochre robes, and formed the Ramakrishna Math at a house in Baranagore. Doubt and difficulties marked the seven years between Ramakrishna's death and Naren's turn at the Parliament of

⁵⁵ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, 116.

World Religions.⁵⁶ Though the Math operated as a headquarters for the monks, many including Naren ventured beyond its walls for pilgrimage and in pursuit of individual liberation.⁵⁷ These first few years of wandering were restricted primarily to Northern India, and Naren was often accompanied by fellow *gurubhais* (guru-brothers). During these travels, he visited several holy places and conversed with learned and holy men from many of the different schools in Hinduism. The Sanskrit scholar Pramadadas Mitra, with whom he stayed and to whom he regularly wrote, and the yogi Pavhari Baba—named for his ability to sustain himself by consuming only air—loom large in the biographical accounts.

Naren corresponded with Pramadadas Mitra with great regularity between 1888 and 1890.⁵⁸ From his tone, it is evident that he regarded Mitra as a respected pandit, and many of the letters contain a long series of questions regarding philosophical matters. In Epistle VIII (8.7.1889), Naren focuses his questions around the theme of *adhikāra* (authority, right, qualification)⁵⁹ and *śruti*, trying to tease out from the tradition and especially Śāṅkara, whether or not Śūdras are permitted to study these texts. He also

⁵⁶ These difficulties include discord between the monastic and lay communities, disagreement amongst the monks themselves—especially regarding the avatar status of Ramakrishna and the direction the Math should take—and economic hardship for both the community and the young monks. ⁵⁶ See Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 151-167 and Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, 31-66. Swami Gambhirananda states, ‘during this period under discussion the Math was very much in a fluid state, with very few residents. For a time things did not look bright. Some entertained doubts about its permanence.’ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁷ For a detailed account of Vivekananda’s travels during this period see Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 169-285. Williams states, ‘personal liberation (*mukti*) seemed to act as a centrifugal force spinning disciples away from the Baranagore Math and sending them on solitary quests for God-realization. (Another explanation of why they left the Math so frequently is that only then were they free to pursue their own *mukti* without Narendra’s searing doubts.’ Williams, ‘Swami Vivekananda,’ 325.

⁵⁸ Vivekananda’s letters to Mitra are reprinted in *CWSV* 6: 200-42 (Epistles i-iv, vi-xiv, xxiv-xxvi, xxix, xxxi-xxxiii). Only Vivekananda’s letters are presented, but in several, one can gather the general gist of Mitra’s response. He wrote his final letter to Mitra in 1897.

⁵⁹ Halbfass defines *adhikāra* as ‘the rules of caste-based hereditary “qualification” for studying the Veda.’ Halbfass, *India and Europe*, ‘Rammohan Roy,’ 205.

raises the question if caste (here he appears to have *varṇa* and not *jāti* in mind) is based upon qualification (quality, ethical character) or heredity (birth). He concludes the letter with a promise to mail Mitra a copy of Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*, about which he remarks, 'one is astonished to find that such renunciation, Vairāgya, and Dāsya-Bhakti [worshiping God as a dutiful servant] have existed even among the Christians.'⁶⁰ These letters exhibit a close and question-filled examination of the tradition in light of Naren's education, tutelage under Ramakrishna, and his travels throughout Northern India. Mitra provided Naren with a scholastic resource with whom he could begin to work out his developing program in a Hindu rather than Brāhmo way.⁶¹

Naren sought out the *Vaiṣṇava* yogi, Pavhari Baba, in Ghazipur. Pavhari Baba had become well known for his austerities, and Beckerlegge suggests that his reputation as a 'model of renunciation' along with Naren's hope that yoga might strengthen his already ailing body attracted him to Pavhari.⁶² The instruction in Raja-Yoga that Naren received while in Ghazipur would inform his latter thinking—in the United States his lectures on Raja-Yoga were amongst his first and the only commentary he produced was on Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras—but more importantly his time here served as a moment of discernment. It is unclear whether Naren intended to replace or just supplement Ramakrishna, but when he resolved to have Pavhari initiate him, he experienced a vision of Ramakrishna that left him feeling 'abashed [and] overcome by self-reproach.'⁶³

⁶⁰ *CWSV* 6: 209.

⁶¹ The brief reference to renunciation coupled with worship as service points to a trajectory in Vivekananda's later thought, but it would be ahistorical to treat this mention as anything more than very raw. In a latter letter (Epistle X, 9.2.1889), Naren writes, 'I am very pleased to find in you a wonderful harmony of Jnana and Bhakti.' *CWSV* 6: 214. Mitra also provided Vivekananda with a person external to the Math with whom he could share his doubts and fears.

⁶² Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, 161.

⁶³ Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 188.

Ultimately, the vision won out, and he lost his desire to be initiated.⁶⁴ The time spent with Pavhari also allowed Naren to wrestle with the desire to pursue individual liberation and his growing sense of a call to serve the poor of India. He asked ‘the saint the reason of his not coming out of his cave to help the world.’ The first answer, while humorous and self-effacing—and also self-defacing—did not satisfy Vivekananda.⁶⁵ Finding the saint the saint in more a serious mood, Vivekananda asked him again. Pavhari replied, ‘Do you think physical help is the only help possible? Is it not possible that one mind can help other minds without the activity of the body?’⁶⁶ Vivekananda had not yet paired God-realization with service, but he began to understand that a traditional model of renunciation would not serve his purpose. Spiritual help would be central to his project, but following Ramakrishna he recognized that empty bellies were an obstacle that had to be overcome first. Having supplied physical help, one could begin then to offer spiritual aid.

Although Naren had already entered the life of a *parivrajak* (itinerant monk) in 1888, Williams notes that July 1890 was a turning point in his relationship with the Math and his brother disciples. He states:

⁶⁴ Though he was not initiated by Pavhari Baba, Naren maintained a deep respect for the yogi. In his ‘Sketch of the Life of Pavhari Baba,’ he concludes with the following dedication: ‘The present writer owes a deep debt of gratitude to the departed saint and dedicates these lines, however unworthy, to the memory of one of the greatest Master he loved or served.’ *CWSV* 4: 295.

⁶⁵ Pavhari’s first response came in the form of a story. He recounts the tale of an accidental saint forced to flee to the forest after being caught stealing and losing his nose as punishment. Ashamed, he figured the best recourse would be to feign deep meditation, but rather than keeping people away his ‘austerities’ only attracted more visitors. Years passed and his followers longed for instruction. With a line growing, he became worried that offering no instruction would undermine his reputation as a saint. So he instructed an eager would-be disciple to return the next day with a razor. When the disciple did he led him to a secluded spot, took the razor, in one cut removed the disciples nose, and initiated him with the words, ‘young man, this has been my initiation into the order. The same I give to you. Do you transmit it diligently when the opportunity comes!’ Pavhari concludes saying, ‘the young man could not divulge the secret of this wonderful initiation for shame, and carried out to the best of his ability the injunctions of his master. Thus a whole sect of nose-cut saints spread over the country. Do you want me to be a founder of another such.’ *Ibid.*, 292-3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

It appears evident that the future Svami Vivekananda (at this point in time he had adopted the name Svami Sachchitananda) could not lead his *gurubhais* from their *bhakti* with its worship of Kali and Ramakrishna or from *jnana* with its direct approach to God-realization in *bhramajnana* into combining these with radical social concern.⁶⁷

This frustration with his community reveals that he had begun to push strongly for a greater social service component in the Math. Breaking contact with all but his closest brothers, he set out on his own, and travelled further throughout the subcontinent. He experienced a great many discomforts throughout the sojourn, and the psycho-spiritual difficulties he faced were soon joined by physical difficulties—an ailing body and regular hunger. The sympathy he lacked in his youth towards the suffering he found during this period.

The accounts of his time as a *parivrajak* are filled with colorful anecdotes—the dancing girl who sang the poems of Surdas, ‘reminding him that it did not behoove saints to look down at sinners’ or breaking caste barriers while sharing *chapatis* with a cobbler or smoking hookah with a *bhangi*. But they also depict Naren awakening to the realities suffered by India’s poor and the practices that have exacerbated these conditions—caste, ceremonial excess, and religious ignorance. In response to being accosted as a ‘common Sadhu, who are no better than thieves and rogues,’ he weds all these themes together in his retort. He states:

Sir, what do you mean? I am a Sanyassin. I am above all your social conventions. I can dine even with a Bhangi. I am not afraid of God, because He sanctions it. I am not afraid of scriptures, because they allow it. But I am afraid of you people and your society. You know nothing of God and the scriptures. I see Brahman everywhere, manifested even in the meanest creature. For me there is no high or low. Shiva, Shiva!⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Williams, ‘Svami Vivekananda,’ 328.

⁶⁸ Eastern and Western Disciples, *Life of Swami Vivekananda*, 218.

This reply won him an audience with the Maharaja of Khetri, who would become his patron helping to secure funds for the trip to the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago and who would bestow upon him the name Swami Vivekananda.

Reflecting on what he had seen during these years of travel, Vivekananda writes, ‘I have gone all over India on foot and have seen with my own eyes the ignorance, misery, and squalor of our people. My whole soul is afire and I am burning with a fierce desire to change such evil conditions.’⁶⁹ From Calcutta north to the Himalayas and south to the Laccadive Sea that opens into the Indian Ocean, Vivekananda reached the end of the subcontinent. When he finally re-established contact with his disciples from Chicago and tried to explain how he ended up there, he wrote, ‘at Cape Comorin, sitting in Mother Kumāri’s temple, sitting on the last bit of Indian rock—I hit upon a plan.’⁷⁰ He continued:

We are so many Sannyasins wandering about, and teaching people metaphysics—it is all madness. Did not our Gurudeva us to say, ‘An empty stomach is no good for religion.’ That these poor people are leading the life of brutes is simply due to ignorance. We have for all ages been sucking their blood and trampling them underfoot... Suppose some disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others, go from village to village, disseminating education in various ways to better the condition of all down to the Chandāla... You may perhaps think what Utopian nonsense this all is! You little know what is in me. If any of you help me in plans, all right, or Gurudeva will show me the way out.⁷¹

And so he traveled to the United States and Europe to raise funds for this nascent project. In exchange for the material wealth and support so wanting in India, he offered the spiritual wealth of India to the West.

⁶⁹ Eastern and Western Admirers, *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*, 107. Quoted in Stephen Abraham, *The Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, 66.

⁷⁰ ‘Epistle XLI’ (Chicago, 3.19.1894), *CWSV* 6: 254.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 254-6.

How Narendra Dutta became Swami Vivekananda is a complex story, and so one can sympathize with the more hagiographical accounts, which see providence at play in his life. There is no simple arithmetic to person making, and so his myriad of biographers warn of making too much of the Western influence or the Brāhmo influence or the Ramakrishna influence. Hatcher uses the analogy of the ascetic's robe, never fashioned from one single cut of cloth, to describe the coming together of all these threads. He writes, 'So it was with Vivekananda's eclectic philosophical robes; they were a complex pastiche of threads and patches. Born into the grand parliament of Indian culture, tutored in the cosmopolitan classroom of colonial Calcutta, transformed by the magnetism of a modern mystic,' to which one could add, awakened to the condition of the masses, Vivekananda left India not so much with a plan or a program, but with an idea.⁷² How could the Brāhmo Samaj's social concern be wedded with the Hinduism he had come to know and to realize under the instruction of Ramakrishna, and other learned figures, so as to address the plight of Indian poor about which many of his *bhadralok* spoke, but had not experienced truly? Vivekananda gradually and circuitously travelled his path to arrive at this question. His extended stay in the West and his teachings on Hindu spirituality there allowed for the answer to percolate slowly. When he returned in 1897, Vivekananda could speak then of his 'Plan and Campaign,' 'The Work Before Us,' and 'The Future of India.'

⁷² Brian Hatcher, *Eclecticism and Modern Hindu Discourse*, 70.

Swami Vivekananda Abroad: The United States and England (1893 – 1897)

Although his plan for the social uplift of the Indian masses had not been realized fully yet, Swami Vivekananda was very much aware that any kind of program would require significant support.⁷³ Securing this aid proved rather difficult in India. During his itinerant years, he believed he had reached a solution: appealing to the rajas of India whose *svadharma* (personal duty) it was to see to the wellbeing of their subjects. He writes:

Just compare the results that one can achieve by instructing thousands of poor people and inducing them to adopt a certain line of action on the one hand, and by converting a prince to that point of view on the other. Where will they get the means for accomplishing a good project even if the poor subjects have a will to do it? A prince has the power of doing good to his subjects already in his hands. Only he lacks the will to do it. If you can once wake up that will in him, then, along with it, the fortune of his subjects will take a turn for the better, and society will be immensely benefitted thereby.⁷⁴

At this point, Vivekananda did not ask for direct financial support. Ramakrishna's stern admonishment that sannyasins ought to avoid 'women and gold' would make the handling of money problematic—something that Vivekananda overcame, but not without some consternation. Instead, he aimed to convince the rajas that social uplift was their dutiful responsibility.⁷⁵ However, this plan achieved little success, and in an 1894 letter to Ramakrishnananda, he revealed the purpose behind his travels to the United States:

⁷³ In a letter sent from Yokohama on his way to the United States, Vivekananda writes, 'How many, unselfish, thoroughgoing men, is Madras ready now to supply, to struggle unto life and death to bring about a new state of things—sympathy for the poor, and bread to hungry mouths, enlightenment to the people at large—and struggle unto death to make men of them who have been brought to level of beasts, by the tyranny of your forefathers?' 'Epistle III,' *CWSV* 5.11 (to Alasinga, Balaji, G. G. Banking Corporation, and all my Madras friends (7.10.1893). This brief call to gather together a group of young men to provide social good and religious education as well as the recognition of a problematic Indian past, will develop into Vivekananda's program while he travels throughout the West.

⁷⁴ Haripada Mitra, *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*, quoted in George M. Williams, *The Quest for Meaning of Svami Vivekananda: A Study of Religious Change*, (Chico, CA: New Horizons, 1974), 55. Williams lists several of the rajas and dewans with whom Vivekananda met during his tour.

⁷⁵ This appeal to the rajas and other persons in power continued through his stay in the United States. In Chicago he wrote to Alasinga Perumal, saying 'See the Raja of Ramand and others from time to

To effect this, the first thing we need is men, and the next is funds. Through the grace of our guru I was sure to get from ten to fifteen men in every town. I next travelled in search of funds, but do you think the people of India were going to spend money!...Selfishness personified—are they to spend anything? Therefore I have come to America, to earn money myself, and then return to my country and devote the rest of my days to the realization of this one aim of my life.⁷⁶

With the support of the Raja of Khetri, whom he visited briefly prior to departing to celebrate the birth of the raja's son, Vivekananda was able to travel to the United States to attend the World Parliament of Religions and to raise funds to support his mission. Chicago provided the grand platform from which he launched his public tour of the United States. Having introduced himself and Hinduism to the audience gathered, his fourth speech, titled 'Religion is not the Crying Need of India,' put forth his purpose. Here he echoed Ramakrishna's sentiment that 'an empty stomach is no good for religion,' as he criticized Christian missionaries bringing spiritual aid to a country super-saturated with religion. India did not need religion; it required material support. The famines that swept through India during his childhood, as well as the food scarcity he encountered during his wandering, provided the backdrop to these words. Furthermore, he acknowledged that his mission in the United States would be uphill. At the conclusion of his speech, he ends saying, 'I came here to seek aid for my impoverished people, and I fully realized how difficult it was to get help for heathens from Christians in a Christian land.'⁷⁷

His success at the Parliament of World Religions won him a national audience eager to learn about India and Hinduism from an actual Hindu. He traveled throughout

time and urge them to sympathize with the masses of India. Tell them how they are standing on the neck of the poor, and that they are not fit to be called men if they do not try to raise them up.' *CWSV* 5.23, 'Epistle V' (Chicago, 11.2.1893).

⁷⁶ *CWSV* 6.255, 'Epistle XLI,' (Chicago, 3.19.1894).

⁷⁷ *CWSV* 1.20, 'Religion is not the Crying Need of India,' (Chicago, 9.20.1893).

the United States delivering lectures on a variety of topics—‘Women of India,’ ‘Hindu Religion,’ ‘Indian Religious Thought,’ and lectures that would be later compiled into publications on Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga, and Raja Yoga.⁷⁸ His letters from this period show the generosity and sometimes hostility he received, the tenuous financial predicament he found himself in, amazement with the general material and educational wealth, and the spiritual want of the nation. The frequency and diversity of his lectures provided an opportunity to reflect deeply upon the Hindu tradition—recognizing and making connections across traditions and categories. His time in the United States and later Europe also exposed him to the organization behind philanthropic efforts in the United States, including the emerging ‘Social Gospel’ movement. The interplay among all these experiences would allow for Vivekananda to develop more fully the relationship between his social program and the Hindu tradition. Again his letters back to his brother disciples demonstrate the growing integration between his social and religious thinking. When he returned to India in 1897, he arrived with a more robust understanding of the practical implications of Vedānta.

⁷⁸ *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*’s ordering oscillates between the chronological and the thematic. Packaging the lectures together on the four yogas follows a thematic structuring. What is lost in this presentation, which occurs over four volumes, is their overlap. The bulk of the lectures that comprise the sections on Karma Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Bhakti Yoga and a portion of the lectures on Jnana Yoga occur over a two-month period between December 1895 and January 1896 while Vivekananda was in New York. The majority of the lectures on Jnana Yoga were delivered in London nearly nine months later in October 1896. These lead into the lecture in Practical Vedānta given in November of that year. Vivekananda would give his first address back in the East at Colombo in January 1897.

Swami Vivekananda and Vedānta: Synthetic Vedānta and Practical

Vedānta as Synthetic Vedānta

Prior to Rammohan Roy, Vedānta lacked a significant presence and major influence in Bengal. David Kopf notes, ‘Bengal had virtually no Vedantic schools and...we have little evidence of Vedantists developing in the region’s highly scholastic and ritualized cultural atmosphere.’⁷⁹ By the time Roy began his project, Vedānta had become nearly synonymous with one particular school of Vedānta: Advaita. D.H. Killingley states that the term was used often to mean Advaita, ‘as if other versions of Vedānta did not exist,’⁸⁰ and Sarakar further reveals the fluidity of Advaita when he states, ‘the Advaita-bad of Śaṅkarāchārya [was] capable of a variety of mutations.’⁸¹ Although Ramakrishna received initiation by Totapuri into one of the ten *dashnami* orders established by Śaṅkara, his study of Advaita Vedānta and the instruction he gave his students like Vivekananda did not follow traditional, orthodox pedagogy. Rambachan states:

Vivekananda never studied the commentaries of Śaṅkara, at least not in the traditional manner, with a teacher affiliated with one of the religious orders (*sampradāya*) reputedly founded by Śaṅkara. His understanding of Śaṅkara came from his own study of the commentaries, and he clearly possessed competence in Sanskrit to be able to read these works in the original...Vivekananda also gave class lectures on Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Brahma-sūtras and engaged in lengthy discussions with the scholar Pramadadas Mitra, of Varanasi, on various aspects of Śaṅkara’s interpretations. Vivekananda appears to be most familiar with Śaṅkara’s commentary on the Brahma-sūtras...In addition to references to Śaṅkara texts, including the Bhagavadgītā and various Upaniṣads, Vivekananda also cites the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi and other poems he considered to be written by

⁷⁹ David Kopf, *British Orientalism and Bengal Renaissance*, 58-9.

⁸⁰ D.H. Killingley, ‘Vedanta and Modernity,’ in ed. C.H Phillips and M.D. Wainwright, *Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernisation c. 1830-1850* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1976), 131. Quoted in Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 220.

⁸¹ J. Sarakar, *The Kathamrita as a Text: Towards Understanding Ramakrishna Paramahansa: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library Occasional Papers on History and Society 12* (Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 1985), 84. Quoted in Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 220.

Śaṅkara. His knowledge of Advaita was also shaped by such works as the *Yogavāsiṣṭa* and *Aṣṭāvakra-gītā*.⁸²

Vivekananda's education in Vedānta, and in particular Advaita Vedānta, came primarily through his own undertaking, with the exception of some conversation and correspondence for the purpose of clarification. Neither Bengal nor Ramakrishna provided great access to traditional forms of Advaita training, and though he was competent enough in Sanskrit to make his way through the main corpus of Śaṅkara's work, he again did so independently from any orthodox *saṃpradāya*. His education granted him great freedom in putting questions to the text and in his interpretation of them. Furthermore, it allowed him to pursue lines of thought that would not be encouraged or, perhaps, supported in a more traditional setting. However, the hermeneutical lens through which he approached and read these texts comes not from orthodox Advaita, but from the example of the life of his guru Ramakrishna. Vivekananda state, 'Then came one whose life was the explanation, whose life was the working out of the harmony that is the background of all the different sects of India, I mean Ramakrishna Paramahansa.'⁸³ The example of Ramakrishna, who held in tension his *bhakti* to the Mother with his Advaita experience under Totapuri, guided Vivekananda to find a way to reconcile the three schools of Vedānta, Dvaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita, and Advaita, under the simple-heading Vedānta.⁸⁴

⁸² Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture*, 5-6. Rambachan follows Walter Neevel regarding Ramakrishna's study and understanding of Advaita.

⁸³ *CWSV* 3.348, 'The Vedānta in All Its Phases,' (1897, Calcutta). See also *CWSV* 3.233, 'Vedānta and Indian Life,' in which Ramakrishna, the person, provides an extra-commentarial authority for making sense of conflicting passages.

⁸⁴ Satishchandra Chatterjee describes Ramakrishna's between nondualism, and qualified nondualism and dualism as two realities or two states of Brahman. He states, 'This implies that *Brahman* or the Absolute in one aspect is indeterminate and impersonal Being (*nirguna*) as the Advaitin holds, and in another, is determinate and personal God (*saguna*) as the Visistadvaitin and Dvaitin affirm. It implies also that Personal God is not an illusory appearance or a lower form of *Brahman*, the Absolute, which is really

Although Vivekananda understands his Vedānta ultimately to be in line with Advaita, he does recognize the truth present in both Dvaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita. To further differentiate Vivekananda's understanding of Vedānta from Śāṅkara's Advaita various qualifiers have been added to the former's. Vivekananda's is called Neo-Vedānta, recognizing the 'newness' of his method's thinking over against traditional forms of Vedānta.⁸⁵ Satishchandra Chatterjee and Abraham Stephen describe it as synthetic, implying not that it is artificial or fake, but highlighting the ways in which it brings together all three major schools of Vedānta under one system.⁸⁶ Similarly, Nalini Devdas identifies it as *Comprehensive Vedānta* highlighting the expansiveness and inclusiveness of Vivekananda's presentation. She states:

It was his conviction that the *Comprehensive Vedānta* can harmoniously embrace scientific knowledge and provide the metaphysical basis for an ethic that is relevant to modern, social and psychological problems. Above all, he believed that that *Comprehensive Vedānta* can answer every man's spiritual need because it holds together a multiplicity of spiritual disciplines, all of which are related to the same goal of mystical realization.⁸⁷

indeterminate and qualityless, but only appears as determinate or qualified when associated with *maya* or covered by *avidya* or ignorance.' Satishchandra Chatterjee, 'Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantism and its Practical Application,' in ed. R. C. Majumdar *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Volume* ed. R. C. Majumdar (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama Press, 1963), 266

⁸⁵ Neo-Vedanta should not be confused with the more pejorative term Neo-Hinduism. The former uses the prefix to denote the difference between traditional forms of Vedanta and their modern counterpart. Neo-Hinduism, as used by Hacker and others, is intended to demonstrate the necessary break from tradition that modern forms of Hinduism represent. To return to an earlier phrasing, Neo-Vedanta implies an understanding in which something is being said that has not been said before. Neo-Hinduism implies that what is being said could not have been said before.

⁸⁶ Chatterjee, 'Swami Vivekananda's Neo-Vedantism.' Stephen, *The Social Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. Chatterjee understands synthetic Vedānta and its relation to Advaita and the other two schools in the following: 'The neo-Vedanta is also *Advaita* inasmuch as it holds that *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, is one without a second (*ekamevadvitīyam*). But as distinguished from the traditional Advaita of Sankara, it is a synthetic *Vedanta* which reconciles *Dvaita* or dualism and *Advaita* or non-dualism and also other theories of reality. So also it may be called concrete monism in so far as it holds that *Brahman* is both qualified and qualityless (*saguna* and *nirguna*), it has forms and is also formless (*sakara* and *nirkara*).' Chatterjee, 260. Stephen describes the nature of this synthesis as 'not at all a systematic philosophical exposition of different *vedantic* teachings but rather the discovery of common features among them.' Stephen, *The Social Philosophy*, 77.

⁸⁷ Nalini Devdas, *Swami Vivekananda* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1968), 12.

While the move towards synthesis is certainly inspired by Ramakrishna, such a turn also is born from pragmatic and practical concerns.⁸⁸ Amidst the great diversity present in Hinduism, Vivekananda aims to locate a common factor, a unifying authority that can bring all these traditions and practices together. He states, ‘In India, too, in spite all of these jarring sects that we see today and all those that have been in the past, the one authority, the basis of all these systems, has yet been the Upanishads, the Vedanta.’⁸⁹ Vivekananda believes that Vedānta can provide India with a national religion that supports different sects and religious dispositions while also gradually advancing these traditions and persons towards an increasingly Advaitin understanding of reality.

How this difference is maintained and yet overcome requires some considerable nuancing. He does not deny that diversity exists in the Upaniṣads. He states, ‘There are certain texts which are entirely dualistic, others are entirely monistic...it is entirely foolish to attempt to prove that the whole of the Vedas is dualistic. It is equally foolish to attempt to prove that the whole of Vedas is non-dualistic.’⁹⁰ Nor does he find such statements contradictory; instead, they are complimentary. There is harmony in the scriptures, but it a harmony born from progression: ‘one idea leading up to another...they begin with dualistic ideas, with worship and all that, and end with a grand flourish of Advaitic ideas.’⁹¹

⁸⁸ This inspiration may be less about the ordering of the synthesis than it is about affirming the truth present in each. As Walter Neevel has shown convincingly, Ramakrishna’s most probably did not order his *sādhana* with Advaita as its pinnacle. Neevel, ‘The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna,’ 83.

⁸⁹ *CWSV* 3.322-3, ‘The Vedanta in All Its Phases.’ He continues, ‘Whether you are a dualist, or a qualified monist, and Advaitist...or whatever you call yourself, there stand behind you as authority, your Shāstras, your scriptures, the Upanishads...Thus the Vedanta, whether we know it or not, has penetrated all sects in India.’

⁹⁰ *CWSV* 3.281, ‘The Work Before Us.’

⁹¹ *CWSV* 3.233-4, ‘Vedanta and Indian Life.’

Vivekananda understands there to be a hermeneutic built into Vedānta that leads one from lower truths to higher truths. Following Ramakrishna's idea of a staircase, Vivekananda employs the analogy of a ladder. One advances from dualism to qualified non-dualism ultimately arriving at pure non-dualism. Each rung is true and necessary for the person who stands upon it. If this were not so, the ladder would fail to support the individual and would not allow them to advance. Brahman supplies the foundation for truth, and each step reflects this truth more completely the higher up it is. A second analogy that Vivekananda uses, 'the old idea Arundhati Nyāya,' follows this same logic. Just as one would show another the location the Arundhati star—a fine star, not easily perceptible to the naked eye—by first pointing to a bright star in the vicinity, so the Upaniṣads progress from the more easily observable and understandable to more subtle teachings.⁹²

In both analogies, Vivekananda is arguing that although diversity exists in the Upaniṣads and that each level presents truth, it is a truth that progresses from lower truths to higher truths, from dualism to nondualism. Vivekananda's synthetic Vedānta follows a particular understanding of *adhikārabheda* (difference in qualifications) in which dualistic and qualified nondualistic teachings are present within the Upaniṣads to meet the reader at her or his level and to get them to advance to deeper levels of truth. As Halbfass notes, 'Śaṅkara emphasizes repeatedly that Veda itself adjusts its teaching to different levels of understanding and qualification, that it uses different methods of

⁹² *CWSV* 3.398, 'The Vedānta.' Vivekananda continues with a clear summation of how this progression occurs. 'Nearly every chapter begins with a dualistic teaching, Upāsanā. God is first taught as some Creator of this universe, its Preserver, and unto whom everything goes at last. He is one to be worshipped, the Ruler, the Guide of nature, external and internal, yet appearing as if He were outside of nature and external. One step further, and we find the same teacher teaching that this God is not outside of nature, but immanent in nature. And at last both ideas are discarded, and whatever is real is He; there is no difference—"Shevtaketu, That thou art."'

instruction and that it works to address different interests and capabilities.’⁹³ Where they differ is the function of reason, experience, and Upaniṣads in their respective thought.

Vivekananda presents his understanding in rather matter-of-fact way. There is simplicity in his teaching rooted in the simplicity of knowledge of Brahma. The advancement through the various stages of Vedānta and arriving at an Advaitic insight into the true nature of reality follows a simple pattern: from finding dissatisfaction for the rung one is on, to a desire to advance, and finally advancement. The process is repeated until it culminates in an advaitic experience of nonduality. There is a discipline to this undertaking, both at the theoretical and practical level. For the former, Vivekananda follows Yājñavalkya instruction to Maitreyī, ‘the Self, my dear Matreyī, should be realized—should be heard of, reflected on, and meditated on’ (BU 2.4.5). And here he would follow Śaṅkara’s explanation. ‘It should first be heard of from a teacher and from scriptures, then reflected on through reasoning, and then steadfastly meditated upon. Thus only is It realized—when these means, viz hearing, reflection and meditation have been gone through’ (BUBh 2.4.5). Vivekananda makes an important move here that will have significant implications for his understanding of the practice of sevā is efficacious. At the practical level, he extends this textual practice into the ethical. Acting in accordance with right knowledge functions similarly to meditation in that it engenders Self-realization. Ethical, social engagement becomes a meditation in action. It dispels any sense of the individualized, false self through a deeper understanding of the unity in Brahman that

⁹³ Halbfass, ‘Vedic Orthodoxy,’ in *Tradition and Reflection*, 57. In BUBh V.I Śaṅkara states: Scriptures seek to instruct merely according to existing circumstances... Therefore the scriptures, taking the dualistic world as it is—created by ignorance and natural to everybody—first advise the performance of rites calculated to achieve their desire ends to those who are possessed of that natural ignorance and defects such as attachment and aversion; afterwards, when they see the well-known evils of actions, their factors and their results, and wish to attain their real state of aloofness, which is the opposite of duality, the scriptures teach them, as a means to it, the knowledge of Brahman, consisting in the realization of the unity of the Self.

pervades all things. Here synthetic Vedānta might be able to reconcile the tension in Practical Vedanta between Advaita and Viśiṣṭādvaita.

Vivekananda's presentation of Vedānta models closely what Francis X. Clooney views as the shift from Advaita as Uttara Mīmāṃsā to Advaita as Vedānta philosophy. He states, 'Certain themes in Advaita Vedānta do indeed become more immediately, apparently accessible if one abstracts them from their scriptural context: there is an ultimate, nondual self; self-knowledge alone is ultimately liberative; sorrow is due to wrong understanding. But it would be a mistake to isolate these themes and mistake the sum of them for a full understanding of Advaita.'⁹⁴ Vivekananda primarily delivered his teachings orally; perhaps had he lived long enough to compose his own commentaries he would have presented his teachings differently. As such, his teachings on Vedānta adhere to this formula: a repackaged, greatest hits collection of aphorisms and teachings, rooted in scripture, but separate and culled apart from a thorough exegetical enterprise of inquiry.

In his work the *Limits of Scripture*, Anantanand Rambachan lays out the different functions that *śruti* (revealed scripture) and *anubhava* (direct, religious experience) have in Śaṅkara's and Vivekananda's thinking. For the former, scripture provides the primary, and approximating sole, means for attaining liberative knowledge. For Vivekananda, experience certifies the efficacy of scripture-based knowledge.⁹⁵ Such an observation is not surprising. He never doubted the salvific efficacy of his prescribed practice. Such a method worked for his master, and such a method worked for him. Religious experience, however, does not replace scripture. Or more appropriately, it does not replace the

⁹⁴ Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *Theology after Vedanta*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), 29. See also 33-34, 87-88.

⁹⁵ Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture*, 9.

teachings present in scripture. Vivekananda still requires a referent for Vedānta. What experience does afford him is a freedom from the text that would be nearly impossible for Śaṅkara to accept.

Despite his claim for inclusivity and the extension of truth, albeit qualified and relative, to dualism and qualified nondualism, Vivekananda's Vedānta is primarily and ultimately advaitic.⁹⁶ The other forms of Vedānta, which bracket also the major theological traditions of Hinduism, serve as steppingstones towards achieving liberating knowledge. However, any simple equation of Vivekananda's understanding of Advaita with Śaṅkara's would be reductionist—collapsing differences and obfuscating similarities. As noted, Vivekananda owes and acknowledges a great debt to Śaṅkara, but he himself recognizes their incongruities. One cannot say that Vivekananda remains in complete continuity with Śaṅkara. Nor can one say that he is completely discontinuous with him. Perhaps this is the paradox that accompanies all Neo-Vedantists. These similarities and differences as they relate to the development and objectives of Practical Vedanta will be taken up in these next sections.

⁹⁶ This statement applies also to non-Hindu traditions. Interestingly, Vivekananda recognizes Jesus to also be a proponent of this Vedantic understanding, identifying the *adhikārabheda* approach to his teaching as well. He states, 'We find something akin to this in the teachings of Jesus which he evidently adapted to different abilities of his hearers. First he taught them of a Father in heaven and to pray to Him. Next he rose a step higher and told them, "I am the vine, you are the branches," and lastly he gave them the highest truth: "I and my Father are one," and the "Kingdom of Heaven is within you," *CWSV* 8.6, 'Discourses on Jñāna Yoga.'

Vedānta as Practical Vedanta

Swami Vivekananda is perhaps best known for his development of Practical Vedanta.

Although the term Practical Vedanta has come to encapsulate the core of his philosophical and ethical teachings, a practical tool for systematizing a rather unsystematic thinker, it is not a term that Vivekananda himself used with great frequency.⁹⁷ Its first and most thorough presentation occurred in a four-part lecture series that Vivekananda delivered in London in 1896. The impetus for these lectures, however, does not begin with him, but is rather a response to a request to ‘say something about the practical position of the Vedanta philosophy.’⁹⁸ Prior to this discussion, he had spent a good portion of his time in London in study, conversation, and raising funds for his publications (*Raja Yoga* and the journal *Prabuddha Bharata*) and his nascent programs in India. The lectures he had delivered, while not impractical, followed a more theoretical bent (‘The Hindu Ideal of the Soul,’ ‘Renunciation,’ ‘The Real and the Apparent Man,’ ‘Realization,’ ‘Vedic Religious Ideals,’ ‘Maya and Illusion,’ ‘Maya and Freedom,’ and commentaries on the *Īśa*, *Kaṭha*, and *Chāndogya* Upaniṣads). These earlier lectures outlined Vivekananda’s understanding of Vedānta thematically and offered the most comprehensive philosophical treatment of the subject. In ‘Practical Vedanta’ he begins to reveal the ethical and social implications of this Vedānta.

The theme of Practical Vedanta may appear to be a sudden digression from his London lecture program, however it does not constitute a dramatic shift in his thinking.

⁹⁷ In presenting and reflecting upon his thought, Vivekananda favors the general term ‘Vedanta’ to describe his thinking. The practicality of this Vedānta is important, and Vivekananda does not view his project to be something new. Instead it is making explicit what he believes to be implicit in Vedānta. Beckerlegge notes that the term ‘practical religion’ was often used by Vivekananda in juxtaposition to the ‘practice of religion,’ and notes that ‘the most telling instances refer to something rather different than the imperative to serve humanity.’ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 206.

⁹⁸ CWSV 2.292, ‘Practical Vedanta: Part I,’ (London 11.10.1896).

Despite the prompt arising from someone other than Vivekananda, the four lectures delivered over one week allowed him to formulate a statement on a topic that had been on his mind for some time. Already in 1894 he had begun to encourage his brother-disciples in India to adopt a *sevā*-like (*bhakti* service-like) understanding of social engagement. While in New York, ten months prior to these talks, he had given overlapping lectures on *Karma*, *Raja*, *Bhakti*, and *Jnana Yoga* that interwove the theoretical with the practical.⁹⁹ Though these are his first public words on Practical Vedanta, the ideas behind it can be seen percolating since his experience at Cape Comorin in 1892 with their roots going back further to the influences upon Vivekananda's intellectual and spiritual development.

In order to understand what Vivekananda means by Practical Vedanta, one must look to how he understands both 'practical' and 'Vedānta.' The terms have become so interlinked in Vivekananda's thinking that 'practical' is the natural outflow of 'Vedānta' and 'Vedānta' is intrinsically practical. Though this split is artificial—for Vivekananda Vedānta is and must be always practical—treating them as independent terms rather than dependent ones in a single construct will help isolate Vivekananda's own understanding of and contribution to Hinduism.

Starting with his understanding of practical, Vivekananda begins the first lecture on Practical Vedanta stating:

As I have told you, theory is very good indeed, but how are we to carry it into practice? If it is absolutely impracticable, no theory is of any value whatever, except as intellectual gymnastics. The Vedanta, as a religion must be intensely practical. We must be able to carry it out in every part of our lives. And not only

⁹⁹ The *Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* presents these talks in the first three volumes. The editors have reproduced these lectures in way that follows a general chronological order but they have clustered them also thematically. In doing so one gets a helpful approximation of when they were delivered combined with a problematic sense that Vivekananda treated each section theme independently. This is complicated further by the repackaging of these talks into individual booklets. One does not have to flip back and forth between the *Complete Works* to find Vivekananda's statements on the four *yogas*; however, lost in this editorial move is the awareness that Vivekananda discussed these themes together.

this, the fictitious differentiation between religion and the life of the world must vanish, for Vedānta teaches oneness—one life throughout. The ideals of religion must cover the whole field of life, they must enter into all our thoughts, and more and more into practice. But this series of lectures is intended to be a basis, and so we must first apply ourselves to theories and understand how they are worked out, proceeding from forest caves to busy streets and cities; the one peculiar feature we may find is that many of these thoughts have been the outcome, not of retirement into forests, but have emanated from persons whom we expect to lead the busiest lives—from ruling monarchs.¹⁰⁰

The oneness of Vedānta—and here Vivekananda favors a more advaitic understanding of Vedānta—eliminates two false binaries he finds operative in religion.¹⁰¹ The first is the distinction between theory and practice, and, at its most basic, practical implies putting the theoretical into practice. According to Vivekananda, Vedānta ought not be confined to the purely intellectual nor be reduced to the psycho-spiritual. It is not a mind game to be played out by an individual detached from the workings of the world. Practice, however, cannot be unmoored from theory. It is telling that Vivekananda states that even a lecture on the practical nature of Vedānta must begin with a theory. The undergirding support for Practical Vedānta arises from its foundation in the idea and ideal of oneness. If everything—from Brahma down to a blade of grass—is one, a person need not turn inwards to realize the unity and reality standing behind all things. The implications of this for his Western audience may be to respond to the missionary critique that understands Hinduism to be a private, personal pursuit of individual perfection—a thoroughly theoretical and thus impractical understanding of religion at the broader social level. For his Indian audience, to whom he will deliver a message of Practical Vedānta in

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ The advaitic quality of Vivekananda's thinking is already present in his synthetic view of Vedānta. It will become even more pronounced during his lecture tour of India at the beginning of 1897.

form if not in name upon his return, the criticism will be upon the disconnect between theory and practice in which the former does not inform the latter.¹⁰²

The second binary that needs to be overcome is the modern split between the private/sacred and the public/secular. Again Vivekananda appeals to the ideal of oneness inherent in Vedānta. Vedānta does not isolate or compartmentalize the spheres of religion and the world. Instead the unity beneath the plurality of experienced reality necessitates a religious orientation that extends into the day-to-day activities of life. Religion, and here Vivekananda means Vedānta, aims to bring about a realization regarding the true relationship between Brahman and ātman as well as Brahman and the world. As all of experienced reality owes its existence and essence to Brahman nothing is beyond the purview of religion—the whole world becomes the field out of which one strives towards liberation. The cave and the forest, the refuge of those who have renounced the world in their pursuit of liberation, is neither the sole nor the ultimate place for working out and thinking about Vedānta. Rather it is in the streets and cities, in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, where the truth of Vedānta is to be realized. One is not religious apart from the world, but instead within it.

Wilhelm Halbfass correctly identifies the theme of Practical Vedanta as ‘the practical relevance, and the ethical and social applicability of the Vedantic metaphysics of nondualism.’¹⁰³ For Practical Vedanta to possess practical relevance, theory—Vivekananda’s particular understanding of nondualism—must inform practice. Orthopraxy, informed by orthodoxy, is not limited to right ‘religious’ practice, i.e. ritual

¹⁰² This critique is present throughout Vivekananda’s tour of India and is especially pointed against the practices of ‘empty ceremonials,’ caste prejudices, and ‘don’t-touchism.’

¹⁰³ Wilhelm Halbfass, ‘Practical Vedanta,’ in ed. Vasudha Dalmia and H. von Steitencron, *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), 211.

or spiritual, but includes also right social practices.¹⁰⁴ Vivekananda argues that Vedānta is not only ethical, but provides the true foundation for all ethics. Having demonstrated Vedānta's ethical nature, Vivekananda still must identify its broader relevance and applicability. If the knowledge that that supports this system is accessible only to a select few—those capable and/or permitted to scriptural study, its import becomes severely limited. For him theory-informed practice cannot be restricted to the religiously adept or to those who possess the necessary traditional qualifications (*adhikāra*) to engage in study. Vivekananda calls all persons whatever their capacity and limitations might be to become Vedantists and to work towards realizing their true nature.

Practical Vedanta and Ethics

Although one should not reduce Practical Vedanta to apologetics, in highlighting the ethical and social dimension of Vedānta, Vivekananda does offer a rejoinder to the commonly deployed missionary critique against the 'ethical and social deficiencies of Vedanta.'¹⁰⁵ Such a critique followed two lines—the practical and the theoretical—and argued that because Vedānta failed at the former the latter necessarily must be lacking. To support this claim, the missionary critique would unfurl a long list of social ills that

¹⁰⁴ In a section of his first lecture on Practical Vedanta which addresses how humans reconcile the ideal with their own world view--either wrongly by bringing the ideal down to fit the view or rightly by raising their view to approximate the ideal—Vivekananda states, 'Now if any man comes to preach to me a certain ideal, the first step towards which is to give up selfishness, to give up self-enjoyment, I think that is impractical. But when a man brings an ideal which can be reconciled with my selfishness, I am glad at once and jump at it. That is the ideal for me. As the word "orthodox has been manipulated into various forms, so has been the word "practical." "My doxy is orthodoxy; your doxy is heterodox." So with practicality... You see how we all use this word practical for things *we* like and can do. Therefore I will ask you to understand that Vedanta, though it is intensely practical, is always so in a sense of the ideal. It does not preach an impossible ideal, however high it be, and it is high enough for an ideal. In this one word, this ideal is that you are divine, 'Thou art that.' *CWSV* 2.294, 'Practical Vedanta I.' The end of Practical Vedanta is for all persons to realize this ideal.

¹⁰⁵ Halbfass, 'Practical Vedanta,' 220.

Vedānta (implying usually Advaita) had failed to check. As Bishop Robert Caldwell (1814 -1892) writes:

Has it promoted popular education, civilization, and good government? Has it educated the people in generous emotions? Has it abolished caste or even mitigated its evils? Has it obtained for widows the liberty of remarriage?... Was it this philosophy which abolished female infanticide, the meriah sacrifice, and the burning of widows? It is this which is covering the country with a network of railways and telegraphs? It is this which has kindled amongst the Native inhabitants of India the spirit of improvement and enterprise which is now apparent? Need I ask the question? All this time the philosophy of quietism has been sound asleep, or 'with its eyes fixed on the point of the nose,' according to the direction of the Gita, it has been thinking itself out of wits. This philosophy has substantially been the creed of the majority of the people for upwards of two thousand years, and if it had emanated from God, the proofs of divine origin ought long ere this to have been apparent, but it has all this time been too much absorbed in 'contemplating self by means of self' to have had any time or thought left for endeavoring to improve the world. What could be expected of the philosophy of apathy, but that it should leave things to take their course.¹⁰⁶

If missionary polemics and apologetics failed to supplant Hinduism in general and Vedantism in particular through a direct appeal to the mind, perhaps souls could be won through an appeal to the heart. The Bengali social reform movements of the 19th c. reveal the seriousness in which some intellectuals took this socially focused challenge. A few like Debrandranath Tagore, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Rammohan Roy, who on intellectual and spiritual matters championed Advaita, echoed a similar critique. When it came to the social and ethical, they too found Advaita wanting. In locating the root of this apparent indifference to social and ethical questions, the missionaries focused especially on non-dualism's understanding of God to be impersonal, while the reformers challenged non-dualism's view that the world of experience and works only pragmatically

¹⁰⁶ J. Murdoch, *The Influence of Vedantism in India* (London and Madras: Christian Lit. Soc. for India, 1903), 202. Quoted in Halbfass, 'Practical Vedanta,' p. 220. Caldwell is not unique in his critique, and through Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda offers a challenge that concedes that India does have many social ills, but confirms a theoretical support for ethics. The need for Practical Vedanta is the need for the theoretical to inform actual ethical and social practices.

(*vyavahārika*) and not ultimately real (*pāramārthika satta*). Both agreed that its emphasis on inward and individual practice did little to engender within Advaita Vedānta a great concern for social engagement.

Although Vivekananda offered a muffled critique of Hinduism while in the West, upon his return to India he voiced a loud condemnation against many of the practices the missionaries and reformers had enumerated. Failure to educate the masses in worldly and spiritual matters, caste prejudice, crushing poverty, and the mistreatment of women, Vivekananda acknowledged all of these as ills that plagued his country. In a letter to Alasinga Perumal, one of the first he wrote upon arriving in the United States, he writes, ‘no religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism.’¹⁰⁷ While the missionaries perceived an intrinsic ethical defect in non-dualism, Vivekananda countered that the fault lay not with the theory, but with the practice. Or more specifically, these problems result from the inability to connect theory with practice, to allow the theoretical truths of Vedānta to inform practical, social, and ethical action.¹⁰⁸

That both the missionaries and Vedantists had failed to realize the ethical aspects of Vedānta did not deter Vivekananda from affirming quite matter-of-factly that Vedānta not only possessed an ethics, but that it also provided the true grounding for all ethics. In a talk delivered approximately a month before his Practical Vedanta lectures, he states:

¹⁰⁷ *CWSV* 5.15, ‘Epistle IV,’ (8.20.1893). In this letter Vivekananda is quite critical of the doctrine of *pāramārthika* and *vyavahārika*, calling them ‘engines of tyranny.’

¹⁰⁸ This presents a bit of paradox: If the theory is sound, why does it not affect/inform practice? One can see how one can enter into infinite regression in trying to answer it. For Vivekananda, this would be a failure in pedagogy—either limiting access to the truth of Vedānta or failing to relate it in a meaningful way. This failure ripples out into the practice in which practice is malformed by being misinformed.

While Vedanta philosophers answered that question [who or what existed at the beginning], they at the same time discovered the basis of ethics. Though all religions have taught ethical precepts, such as, ‘Do not kill, do not injure; love your neighbor as yourself,’ etc., yet none has given the reason. Why should I not injure your neighbor? To this question there was no satisfactory or conclusive answer forthcoming, until it was evolved by the metaphysical speculations of the Hindus who could not rest satisfied with mere dogma. So Hindus say that this Atman is absolute and all-pervading, therefore infinite. There cannot be two infinities, for they would limit each other and would become finite. Also each individual is a part and parcel of that Universal Soul, which is infinite. Therefore in injuring his neighbor, the individual actually injures himself. This is the basic metaphysical truth underlying all ethical codes.¹⁰⁹

Vivekananda reasoned that because the world’s diverse theological and philosophical traditions shared basic ethical principles there must be a single reality beneath the plurality of traditions that provided the foundation for such widespread similarity and agreement. However, these traditions failed to give a proper explanation for why one ought to follow these principles. Appeal to a personal God and to a tradition’s sacred writings as the source for ethics may guide the faithful of that tradition, but its convincingness and effectiveness diminishes beyond its confessional boundaries. A universal ethic requires a universal ground, and Vivekananda concluded that the only true universal ground could be that unified reality, Brahman, that is the source of all things. His ethics are neither deontological nor teleological; they are ontological.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ *CWSV* 1.385, ‘Vedanta as Factor of Civilization,’ (Wimbledon, England, btw. 9.17-10.6.1896). Several months prior to both these lectures, Vivekananda delivered a talk in New York that shows the beginning of an ethics rooted in Vedānta. He states, ‘Yet we know that therein lies the explanation of all ethics, of all morality and all spirituality in the universe. Why is that every one says, ‘Do good to others?’ Where is the explanation? Why is that all great men have preached the brotherhood of mankind, and greater men the brotherhood of all lives? Because whether conscious of it or not, behind all that, through all their irrational and personal superstitions, was peering forth the eternal light of the Self, denying all manifoldness, and asserting that whole universe is but one.’¹⁰⁹ *CWSV* 2.253, ‘The Atman,’ (New York, 2.2.1896).

¹¹⁰ Paul Hacker contends that it was only following Vivekananda’s encounter with Schopenhauer and Deussen that his ethics shifted from relativism to universalism. Hacker uses relativism in two different ways in this assessment. The first is that Vivekananda initially viewed ethics to be relative to certain religions and cultures—one religion permits X; the other does not. The three citations he offers, all coming from Vivekananda’s ‘Karma Yoga’ lectures, which predate ‘Practical Vedanta’ by a year, are best understood as descriptive rather than normative. There are differences in ethics from culture to culture and

To articulate this Vedantic ethic, Vivekananda extends Advaitic theory into the practical, social realm. In ‘Practical Vedanta’ and his lectures on Vedānta in India, he begins not with ethical exhortations, but with the truth that Advaita Vedānta makes known. The aim of Advaita Vedānta is to reveal the true identity of the self (*ātman*) and the relationship of non-difference between the self and Brahman. This identity is not something one attains or becomes, but rather something one comes to know and realize. The Upaniṣads and their study through exegesis lead the one who desires liberation and knowledge of Brahman gradually towards right understanding. Vivekananda draws upon these advaitic insights to establish an ethics founded upon a universal and ontological solidarity of all persons and things. The unity each person shares with Brahman is also a unity that each person shares with all other things.

In ‘Practical Vedanta III,’ Vivekananda builds upon the *mahāvākya* (great sentence) from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad *tat tvam asi*, that thou art, to express the true nature of the individual. He states, “O Shevtaketu, thou art that.” You are that Impersonal Being; that God for whom you have been searching all over the universe is all the time yourself—yourself not in the personal sense but in the impersonal sense. The man we know now, the manifested, is personalized, but the reality of this is the Impersonal.’¹¹¹ Due to ignorance (*avidyā*) a person mistakes the personalized self—the

from religion to religion, but Vivekananda does not mean relativism should be the norm, but instead is the proper description of this phenomenon. Furthermore, Vivekananda still finds some common ground despite this diversity. The second use of relativism implies non-finality. Ethics is a preparatory means to right knowledge rather than an end itself. This usage may be a more accurate description of Vivekananda’s understanding of ethics—especially as a practice that can lead to realization. The tension will be explored below.

¹¹¹ For Vivekananda ‘Impersonal’ refers to *nirguṇa* Brahman. He employs this term to differentiate it from ‘Personal’ God which can mean either *saguṇa* Brahma in general or one chosen deity (*iṣṭadevatā*)

CWSV 2.334, ‘Practical Vedanta III.’ The *mahāvākya* ‘*tat tvam asi*’ appears in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7. It follows upon a lengthy discussion between Śvetaketu and his father about the true nature

pragmatic, empirically real (mind-body complex)—for the Impersonal Self (*ātman*)—the ultimately real. Feelings of fear and desire result from this mistaken confusion, as do actions that seek to alleviate these emotions. When these are enacted, the personalized idea of the self is reified and ignorance/bondage is perpetuated. For Vivekananda, ethics is founded upon right understanding of the nature of Self. Furthermore, as a practice it becomes an aide to liberation and dismantling a false view of the self by encouraging actions that foster ideas of unity and solidarity. Ignorance leads to selfish, self-interested (unethical) action; liberating knowledge leads to selfless (ethical) action—for Vivekananda ‘renunciation’—which centers upon the true nature of the self.

Vivekananda’s extension of Advaita’s teaching into the ethical and practical, and especially his use of *tat tvam asi* and non-difference to support such a move, has led thinkers like Paul Hacker to assert that such a turn marks a radical break from traditional Advaita. As noted above, a key argument for this assessment is the perceived amorality of Śaṅkara and Advaita. Ethics do not feature prominently in either, and when they do, they frequently address the behavior and character of one who has achieved liberation already. While one perhaps may want Śaṅkara to layout explicitly an ethical system according to Advaita, he does not and he needs not.¹¹² His project has a very limited scope; its purpose is to help the student achieve realization. An ethical life might be conducive to this end—he gives good reason to think so—but right knowledge rather

of the self. The statement is intentionally disruptive. As Clooney notes, ‘The effects of the great sayings is perhaps greater, because not only are they concentrated, but they are also paradoxical claims which jar the readers by pointing to a truth which they cannot easily locate in ordinary experiences. A great saying such as ‘You are that’ (*tat tvam asi*) upsets the reading of the Upanisads because, in the Advaita reading, it seems to equate two things that not ought to be equated: the phenomenal, finite self (*tvam*) and Brahman (*tat*). Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta*, 86.

¹¹² Śaṅkara, like other Vedantins and orthodox Brahmins, assumes an ethical and ritual world supported by Vedic and dharmic values. He does not provide an ethical system because there is one already in place. The ethical guidelines for the liberated person are offered because such a person would now be outside this matrix.

than right ethics is Śaṅkara's focus. The question that Hacker raises then is between extension and fabrication. Can an ethic be drawn out of Śaṅkara or must it be a superimposition—taking Western ideals and recasting them as Vedantin?

That Advaita Vedānta is not primarily concerned with ethics does not mean that ethics is necessarily antithetical to it. The theory that Vivekananda uses to support much of his ethics is grounded in Śaṅkara. In 'Practical Vedanta II,' he states, 'The theme of Vedanta is to see the Lord in everything, to see things in their real nature, not as they appear to be.'¹¹³ Beckerlegge also remarks that 'the ethical dimension of Vedānta is explained in terms of the oneness of human nature, which provides the basis for universal love, justified most commonly with reference to the *Isha Upanishad*, and the beneficial consequences of action undertaken in a spirit of detachment and selflessness, as taught by the *Bhagavadgita*.'¹¹⁴

In 'The Vedanta,' he connects this idea of 'seeing the Lord in everything' directly with ethics. He states:

Know through Advaita that whomever you hurt, you hurt yourself; they are all you. Whether you know it or not, through all hands you work, through all feet you move, you are the king enjoying the palace, you are the beggar leading that miserable existence in the street; you are in the ignorant as well as in the learned, you are in the man who is weak, and you are in the strong; know this and be sympathetic. And that is why we must not hurt others.¹¹⁵

In both passages Vivekananda is referencing the *Bhagavadgita* (BG 13.27-28), and in the second he provides a rephrasing of the verses, 'He who sees everyone in himself, and

¹¹³ *CWSV* 2.312, 'Practical Vedanta II,' see also *CWSV* 2.149, 'Everything in God,' (10.271896).

¹¹⁴ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, 211. Sutra six of the *Īśa Upaniṣad* is especially influential in establishing unity. It states, 'When a man sees all beings within his very self, and his self within all beings, What bewilderment, what sorrow can there be, regarding the that self of him who sees oneness.'

¹¹⁵ *CWSV* 3.425, 'The Vedanta,' (11.12.1897, Lahore). Here the teaching of the Gita is combined with the *Īśa Upaniṣad* through the idea of sympathetic perception—seeing the Self in all others, and all in the Self.

himself in everyone, thus seeing the same God living in all, he, the sage, no more kills the self by the self.’¹¹⁶ For Vivekananda, the unity of beings in Brahman demands a sympathetic and ethical attitude towards all beings regardless of their accidental qualifications—rich, poor, smart, ignorant. At the essential level, all persons are equal and all persons are one. Such a disposition is required of both the one who knows and the one who does not know.¹¹⁷

In his commentary on these verses, Śaṅkara confirms this unity of all beings ‘from Brahma to things stationary.’ He continues:

He dwells alike in all beings who are characterized as ‘perishing.’ He is distinguished as ‘not perishing’ to stress the total difference between these beings and the Supreme Lord... In respect of those who see many disparate selves, he who perceives the single undivided Self has been qualified. Others do not see, since their seeing is erroneous, as of the man who sees many moons’ (BGBh 13:27-8).¹¹⁸

However, Śaṅkara’s immediate emphasis is not upon ethics but instead upon correct perception. He does not deny that some will find this teaching difficult, given the conditioning to focus on the difference between things rather than their inherent unity. On verse 13.30—‘When he perceives that the variety of beings have one center from which all expand, then he is at one with Brahman’—Śaṅkara demonstrates that right knowledge is the import of this section. He states, ‘He who directly perceives, according to the instructions of the *śāstras* and teachers, ‘the multiplicity of beings as abiding in the one

¹¹⁶ Ibid. J.A.B. van Buiten translates these verses, ‘He who sees the Supreme Lord equally present in all creatures, not perishing while these creatures perish, he sees indeed. When he sees the lord equally present everywhere, he himself no longer hurts the self and then goes the supreme journey.’ J.A.B. van Buiten, *The Bhagavadgita in the Mahabharata: Text and Translation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 125-7.

¹¹⁷ This sympathetic and ethical disposition allows one to realize gradually the truth of non-difference. It reorients one’s perception beyond the accidental and into the essential even at the beginning one does not know this truth. *Sevā*, presented in the next chapter, is a practice built upon this new recognition.

¹¹⁸ *Srimad Bhagavad Gita Bhāṣya of Sri Śaṅkaracarya*, trans. A.G. Krishna Warrierm (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2008), 456-7

Self,’ perceives ‘that all is this Self alone (BU 2.4.[6])—and as proceeding from that very Self, becomes, at that very time, Brahman. This is the idea’ (BGBh 13.30)¹¹⁹ Śaṅkara does offer a brief statement on ethical behavior in his comment on BG 13.28, but the referent here is one who perceives incorrectly and so acts out of this ignorance.¹²⁰

Vivekananda is correct that Advaita presents an ultimately real unity of all things, and distinctions like caste and orders of life (*varṇāśrama*) are superimpositions upon the Self.¹²¹ It is true that such statements serve to correct misconceptions about the Self; they do not serve explicitly to establish correct ethical behavior. However, within Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Bhagavadgita* there are two sections in which identity with all beings could lead to affinity or sympathy for all beings. In verse 6.32 Krishna instructs Arjuna that, ‘he is deemed the ultimate yogin, who, by comparing everything with himself, sees the same in everything, whether it be blissful or wretched.’ Śaṅkara comments that by comparing everything with himself the person possessing right perception sees:

“As I like pleasure, so do all things” and “as I am averse to pain and shun it, so do all living beings.” He, the real Yogin, does not act against anyone, does not injure anyone. Thus who injures none, and adheres to right perception, is deemed the supreme among Yogins.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 460. The reference cited from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upaniṣad (BU) is 2.4.6 ‘This Brahmana, this Kṣatriya, these worlds, these gods, these beings, and this all are this Self.’ The edited translation I cite identifies the verse as 2.4.8, but this is an editorial error. Śaṅkara comments, ‘Because everything springs from the Self, is dissolved in It, and remains imbued with It during continuance, for it cannot be perceived apart from the Self. Therefore everything is the Self’ (BUBh 2.4.6).

¹²⁰ In reply to the objection, ‘Surely no man injures himself,’ Śaṅkara replies, ‘the ignorant may very well repudiate the Self. Indeed all ignorant people repudiate this most explicit and immediate Self, resort to the non-Self as the Self proper, go on repeatedly choosing and rejecting selves, and act righteously or unrighteously. Thus the Self gets hurt’ (BGBh 13.28). The difference in action results from a perceived differences in selves.

¹²¹ Śaṅkara states in BUBh 2.4.5, ‘The different castes such as the Brāhmaṇa and Kṣatriya, the various orders of life, and so on, upon which rites depend, and which consist of actions, and their factors and results, are objects of notions superimposed on the self by ignorance—i.e. based on false notions like that of a snake in a rope.’ His disciple, Sureśvara, similarly states in *Naiṣkarmyasiddhi* 2.88, ‘That which is the witness of the mind of the Caṇḍāla, is the same as the witness of the mind of Brahmā. The light of consciousness is the same in both; but appears many, owing to the differences of what is illumined.’ As we will see later, however, though such distinctions are false, they do have significance especially with regards to *adhikāra* to engage in scriptural studies. See also BGBh 5.18-19.

Here identity, born from right perception, leads to sympathy for the pains and pleasures of others, as well as an ethical charge not to injure. Granted, it is formulated in the negative, an act not to be undertaken, and applied to one who already possesses right knowledge, but it does establish an ethic based upon shared identity. Vivekananda amplifies it by making it applicable both to those who have right knowledge and to those who do not. He extends this comparison into the practical level—one need not have great insight, only empathy, to connect one’s experiences with another’s—only then to lift it back up to the theoretical. Empathy requires a common ground, and Vedānta provides the commonest ground of them all.

One perhaps could draw a more positive ethic from the passages in the *Bhagavadgita* that call for working for ‘the welfare of the world’ (that which holds the world together) (*lokasaṃgraha*) and ‘delighting in the welfare of all’ (*sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*).¹²² In BG 3.20 Krishna provides the example of Janaka—a favorite of Vivekananda—as a person who worked for the world’s welfare. Śaṅkara’s commentary states, ‘still being subject to operative past works (*prārabdhakarma*), you ought to work in order to promote the world’s welfare i.e., to safeguard people from falling into wrong paths of conduct.’ In his commentary on BG 3.25-26, Śaṅkara states, ‘For Me [Krishna], the Self-knower, thus eager to promote the world’s well-being or for any other like Me, there is no duty other than the promotion of that well being.’ This duty entails that ‘the man of wisdom should not cause it to the ignorant who do not discriminate and are

¹²² The translation in quotations are Anantanand Rambachan’s in *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 138. In his chapter on liberation, Rambachan looks to resources within Advaita Vedānta that could support a more positive, ethical engagement with the world. In this way, his project is not all that dissimilar from Vivekananda’s, though as we shall see below, Rambachan follows a more strictly Advaitin approach in his constructive project.

attached to works. What then should he do? He should cause them to do all works by doing them himself, integratedly’ (BGBh 3.26).¹²³

Śaṅkara has a very defined understanding of what promotion of *lokasaṃgraha* means: providing a safeguard for those who lack Self-knowledge from falling into wrong paths of conduct. Krishna, Janaka, and other liberated persons provide an example of how to perform work, but they do not function as moral exemplars. Furthermore, Śaṅkara offers a limited conception of the ‘world’s welfare’ which suggests its maintenance rather than a modern conception of welfare as flourishing. This is especially a concern for Vivekananda who sees the application of BG 3.26 as a frequently cited verse for maintaining the status quo.¹²⁴

Both BG 5.25 and 12.4 present the idea of ‘promoting the welfare of all.’ In his commentary on 5.25, Śaṅkara defines it simply as ‘they injure none.’ In 12.4, he offers neither a subsequent definition nor a further qualification. Although ‘working for the world’s welfare’ and ‘promoting the welfare of all’ suggest a strong support for positive ethical action in the world and towards others, Śaṅkara understands their application in quite a narrow and passive way. They apply to those who possess right knowledge and

¹²³ Śaṅkara glosses ‘*na janayet*’ (√*jan*—to generate, birth, cause) from the verse with ‘*na utpādayet*’ (√*ut-pad*—to arise, originate, produce). Both are in the causative with the idea that the wise person should not cause this bewilderment—‘a split in, jolt to’ the idea “I must do this work and enjoy its fruit.’ As this section in the *Bhagavadgita* is about first the necessity of performing work, and second about the necessity of performing work rightly (unattached to its fruits), the sense of Śaṅkara’s comment is that this bewilderment will lead to a cessation of work rather than to detachment. Śaṅkara introduces BG 3:30 with, ‘How should work be done by the ignorant who seeks liberation and who is called to work?’, to which the verse responds ‘Surrendering all works to Me [Krishna] with your mind intent upon the universal self (*ātman*). It is not a question of ignorance, but one of desire for liberation. If one does not have such a desire, it is best to leave them alone. Vivekananda here disagrees with Śaṅkara and as it will be shown, the *Bhagavadgita* as well.

¹²⁴ In ‘Evils of Adhikaravada,’ Vivekananda notes, ‘Their contention is that the knowledge of the highest spiritual truths will bring about confusion in understanding of the weak-minded men, and so the Śloka goes, ‘One should not unsettle the understanding of the ignorant, attached to action (by teaching them Jñāna): the wise man, himself, steadily acting, should engage the ignorant in all work” (Gita 3.26). I cannot believe in the self-contradictory statement that light brings darkness. *CWSV* 5.263-4, ‘The Evils of Adhikaravada,’ (date unknown).

who are firmly established in it. They are not broad guidelines to be followed by those who do not know correctly, and Śaṅkara appears to argue that such an application could have the opposite effect, i.e. promote the un-welfare of the world. However, Śaṅkara is an exegete whose project is to work out the liberating content of the scriptures upon which he is studying and commenting. He is limited by the text before him and by the scope of his project. As Anantanand Rambachan states:

Although he admits, following the Bhagavadgita, that the liberated person can engage in actions for the welfare of the world, this is not a viewpoint that he articulates anywhere else. It is fair to say that action in the world has generally negative connotations in the interpretations of Śaṅkara and these are not commended with enthusiasm. His understanding and concern with human suffering is largely individual in nature and focused on the removal of self-ignorance.¹²⁵

For Śaṅkara, right ethical behavior is not the immediate and pressing concern of his project. This does not mean that either he or Advaita Vedānta is amoral. Though, brief and not-fully-developed, one sees a basis for ethical consideration in his thinking. Here, Vivekananda is especially attracted to the possibilities that unity in identity present for such an undertaking. That he goes beyond Śaṅkara's own Advaita project to do this does not mean necessarily that he breaks from this tradition. Rather he is, as he acknowledges, setting off into uncharted waters—making the theoretical and spiritual, practical and ethical.

Paul Hacker challenges Vivekananda's project of Practical Vedanta as not simply being an excursion into the uncharted waters of Advaita Vedānta, but a falling off the map. He views an ethic founded upon unity in identity to be a fabrication of Neo-Hinduism, that is an artificial creation based upon the influence of European thinker rather than an extension of Hindu thought into practical matters. In 'Schopenhauer and

¹²⁵ Rambachan, *The Advaita Worldview*, p. 109.

Hindu Ethics,' Hacker makes a strong case that Arthur Schopenhauer and later Paul Deussen's *tat tvam asi* ethic influenced Vivekananda.¹²⁶ The question remains, however, how should one precisely understand this influence—both the European influence in general and the *tat tvam asi* influence in particular and whether influence is necessarily the same as rupture with tradition.

Hacker closes his assessment of Neo-Hindu projects—which Vivekananda's would represent for him—with the following observation:

In each case some kind of impulse from a Western philosophical system or concept, or from Christianity and its theology, causes something in Hinduism to be recognized as valuable, and to appear notable, worth propagating, useful for solving a current problem, or suitable for use in apologetics.¹²⁷

There is no denying that Vivekananda is responding to Western critique of Hinduism, and that this challenge had sent him back to his tradition with an urgency to

¹²⁶ Hacker traces the use of *tat tvam asi* through four stages: First, its treatment in the Hindu commentarial tradition; second, its 'discovery' by Schopenhauer, third, Deussen's retooling of it, and fourth, Vivekananda's correspondence and conversation with Deussen. The intent is to demonstrate that *tat tvam asi* as a foundation for a Vedantin ethic is not Indian, but European, and furthermore an exact moment can be dated for its inception back into Indian philosophy. In fact, Hacker provides two possible dates. The first is February 25, 1893, when Deussen gave his lecture 'On the Philosophy of the Vedanta,' which was 'immediately printed in India.' The second is September 9, 1893, when Vivekananda visited Deussen in Kiel, Germany. Hacker states, 'Although not all Vivekananda's writings can be dated, the above facts should be enough to the conclusion that he learned the pseudo-Vedantic ethic during his conversations with Paul Deussen and from Deussen's Bombay lecture, of which he probably had a copy. Among those dated works works which contain the *tat tvam asi* ethic, none is dated earlier than September, 1896.' Hacker, 'Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics,' 297. Contrary to the final sentence, Vivekananda references *tat tvam asi*, though without direct ethical significance, in a January 1896 talk titled 'Immortality' (2:226-237). In 'The Atman' (2:238-253) delivered in February 1896 he directly references Max Müller and Paul Deussen and later provides an ethics based on advaitic identity. Finally, in March 1896 in a lecture titled 'The Spirit and Influence of Vedanta' (1:387-392), Vivekananda directly links *tat tvam asi* with ethics and morality. Nevertheless, Deussen's influence is present, and one might assume that Vivekananda would desire to meet Deussen only if he was familiar with the man and his thinking.

Hacker, however, concludes a bit more open-endedly than perhaps he might have thought: 'Whether Uddalaka Aruni's vitalistic monism could have taken an ethical direction if the development into a radical monism of spirit had not taken place is an idle question. What is certain is that it could not have taken such a direction in ancient or medieval India.' Hacker, 'Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics,' 277-8. This is an interesting admission. Though it would be counter-historical, Hacker seems to suggest that the tradition could have developed in such a way so as to promote an ethics rooted in Vedānta. That it did not, and that it was not interpreted by the tradition in such a way is significant. Equally significant is the suggestion that it could have, had the tradition emphasized a different end.

¹²⁷ Hacker, 'Schopenhauer and Hindu Ethics,' 309.

provide a counter-statement. It would be misguided, however, to view Practical Vedanta simply as a rejoinder to the West. His teaching on Vedānta, both at the theoretical and practical level, was also directed to his countrymen and women and his fellow Hindus as well. Some of the problems he is addressing are modern problems; others are problems that have become problems in modern times. Halbfass is correct when he states, ‘Vivekananda was not concerned with merely appending an ethical and social dimension onto Hindu thought, but rather deriving this from the most basic principles of Hinduism itself.’¹²⁸ The question then becomes, is Vivekananda appealing to tradition in order to say something that it has not yet said or in order to say something that tradition cannot say—as Hacker contends.¹²⁹

Paradoxically, with respects to the ethics of Practical Vedanta, it may very well be both. It is clear from the above that Vivekananda is attempting to do something with Practical Vedanta that Śaṅkara did not do. As Halbfass notes, ‘Śaṅkara certainly did not invoke the *tat tvam asi* to question the existing social divisions or to promote social programmes and neighborly love.’¹³⁰ Furthermore, his brief statements on ethics seem to be limited to those whom have already achieved liberation—a very small minority of the population—and the sharp distinction between the *vyāvahārika* (pragmatic level of experience) and *pāramārthika* (ultimate level of reality) place severe limitations on his creating a thoroughly advaitic Practical Vedanta.

Vivekananda acknowledges the limitations of Advaita, when he states, ‘the highest Advaitism cannot be brought down to practical life. Advaitism made practical

¹²⁸ Halbfass, ‘Neo-Hinduism and Modern Indian Traditionalism,’ 241.

¹²⁹ This is how I understand Rambachan’s constructive turn in *The Advaita Worldview*.

¹³⁰ Halbfass, ‘Practical Vedanta,’ 216.

works from the plane of Visishtadvaitism.¹³¹ He treats Śaṅkara similarly, admiring the depth of his intellect while criticizing the smallness of his heart. Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta cannot work in a strict, Śaṅkaran-advaitic framework. Only rarely is Practical Vedanta directly identified with Advaita, and even in those instances it is qualified by a hint of qualified non-dualism.¹³² Prior to his conversation with Deussen and his usage of the *tat tvam asi* ethic, Vivekananda had a different inflection in his understanding of unity in identity. In an 1894 letter to his brother disciples he writes, 'If you want any good to come, just throw your ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God—every being that wears a human form—God in His universal as well as individual aspect.'¹³³ Here one can see the idea of unity in identity presented in a more *bhakti*, devotional fashion, which still emphasizes the universal, Impersonal and the individual, personal forms. Rather than providing a foundation for Vivekananda's ethics, Deussen and *tat tvam asi*, provide another grammar for presenting his teaching. Nevertheless, its influence is notable, especially as it coincides with a shift towards speaking of Hinduism increasingly in Vedantin categories.

In his efforts to articulate the ethical dimensions of Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda never averred from the belief that such a move was both necessary and achievable. In doing so, he nevertheless extends beyond a strict, traditional understanding of Advaita Vedānta.¹³⁴ For the most part, he acknowledges his transgression, going so far

¹³¹ *CWSV* VI.122, 'Notes of Class Talks and Lectures.'

¹³² Vivekananda states in 'The Vedanta,' 'Therefore, young men of Lahore, raise once more that mighty banner of Advaita, for on no other ground can you that wonderful love until you see that same Lord is present everywhere.' *CWSV* 3.430.

¹³³ *CWSV* VI. 264, 'Epistles XLV,' (1894). Here one can see the idea of unity in identity presented in a more *bhakti*, devotional fashion that still emphasizes the universal, Impersonal and the individual, personal form.

¹³⁴ Rambachan demonstrates the practical and ethical teachings a more liberal interpretation of Advaita Vedānta could bear, and they are comparable to many of types of conclusions to which

as to offer his critiques of Śaṅkara and his interpretation. Were he marching under a pure banner of Advaita, we could then press the question whether or not he is undertaking a project beyond the capabilities of Advaita. But he is not. In seeking a connection between metaphysics and ethics, he may not be a strict advaitin, but even as modern thinker, he is not without precedent. As Halbfass notes, ‘even within the Sanskrit tradition, such texts as the *Yogavāsiṣṭa* provide views on nondualism, and on the relationship between metaphysics and ethics.’¹³⁵

In bringing metaphysics down to the practical plane, some of the rigor necessary for metaphysical speculation is lost. If Practical Vedanta is conceived as bridge between both planes, a descending but also an ascending, the question shifts from how the metaphysical can lead to the practical to how can the practical lead to the metaphysical? Can Practical Vedanta lead to self-realization? The question of qualification, addressed in the next section is important. As is how Vivekananda understands Vedānta, the topic under consideration in the concluding section.

Practical Vedanta and *Adhikāra*

The demonstration that Vedānta possesses an ethics establishes its practical relevance in so far as it is able to address moral and social questions. However, such relevance remains irrelevant if Vedānta cannot impact all persons regardless of their context or capacity.

Vivekananda arrives. As will be seen in the next two sections with respects to *adhikāra* and textual study, both Vivekananda and Rambachan break from more orthodox interpretations—Śaṅkara’s included.

¹³⁵ Halbfass, ‘Practical Vedanta,’ 217. He continues, ‘the distinction of strict nondualism from related ideas concerning the omnipresence of the self, or the divine, is not very relevant in those traditional texts which try to establish a connection between ethics and metaphysics. Nor is it very significant for Vivekananda himself.’

Vivekananda states:

These are the principles of ethics, but we shall now come down lower and work out the details. We shall see how this Vedanta can be carried into our everyday life, the city life, country life, the national life, and the home life of every nation. For, if religion cannot help man wherever he may be, wherever he stands, it is not of much use; it will remain only a theory for a chosen few. Religion, to help mankind, must be ready and able to help him in whatever condition he is, in servitude or in freedom, in the depths of degradation or in the heights of purity; everywhere, equally, it should come to his aid.¹³⁶

He never doubts that the truths of Vedānta will meet the people where they are, nor does he doubt the profound impact such an encounter will have on individuals, communities, and nations. The last obstacle remaining to realizing the potential of Practical Vedanta is making such encounters actual. In the lectures leading up to Practical Vedanta and in his talks on Vedānta in India, Vivekananda attempts to do just this. All his discussions on the metaphysics of Vedānta—the nature of Self, the identity of Brahman, *māyā*, liberation—aim at making the truth of Vedānta known to those who otherwise may not be able to access it. Likewise, his desire to create institutions for scriptural study and to form a band of sanyassins tasked to travel from village to village proclaiming the truths of Advaita had been to disseminate publically and popularly knowledge that had been the sole reserve of a select and qualified few.¹³⁷ Studied and discussed in caves and forests, Vedānta had been apart from the masses for too long, and Vivekananda hoped to rectify this.

In ‘Vedanta and its Application to Indian Life,’ a talk given during his tour of India in 1897, he states:

Ay, but it was only for the Sannyasin! Rahasya (esoteric)! The Upanishads were in the hands of the Sannyasin; he went to the forest! Shankar was a little kind and

¹³⁶ *CWSV* 2.300-1, ‘Practical Vedanta I.’

¹³⁷ Despite his vision at Cape Comorian, Vivekananda never sought to replace spiritual education with social service. Instead he understood the latter to be a necessary complement to the former.

said even Grihasatas (householders) may study Upanishads, it will do them good; it will not hurt them. But still the idea is that the Upanishads talked only of the forest life of the recluse... It is true for everyone in every occupation of life. These conceptions of Vedānta must come out, must remain not only in the forest, not only in the cave, but they must come out to work at the bar and the bench, in the pulpit, and in the cottage of the poor man, with the fisherman that are catching fish, and with the students that are studying. They call to every man, woman, and child whatever be their occupation, wherever they may be. And what is there to fear! How can the fisherman and all carry these out the ideals of the Upanishads? The way has been shown. It is infinite; religion is infinite, none can go beyond it; and whatever you do sincerely is good for you... Wherever you go there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on their head. If you teach Vedānta to a fisherman, he will say, I am as good a man as you; I am a fisherman, you are a philosopher, but I have that same God in me as you have in you. And that is what we want, no privilege for anyone, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that divine is within, and everyone will work out his own salvation.¹³⁸

The truth present in Vedānta offers liberating knowledge that frees the individual trapped in ignorance. Because the problem is immediate and universal, Vivekananda views its alleviation to be equally universal. The knowledge that Vedānta reveals is that of Brahman, and the individual's and the world's relationship to this ultimate reality. It is true for all persons because Brahman itself is ultimately true.

Although the privilege he speaks about above is not limited to caste-based qualification (*adhikāra*) for studying the Veda, Vivekananda recognized that such privileged, and thus limited, access to the proper means for deliberating on Brahman remained a major obstacle to making Vedānta practical.¹³⁹ Like Rammohan Roy,

¹³⁸ *CWSV* 3.244-6, 'Vedānta and its Application to Indian Life,' (1897).

¹³⁹ In 'Vedānta and Privilege,' which he delivered two weeks after the 'Practical Vedānta' lectures, Vivekananda presents the problem of privilege in India to be rooted in birth and spiritual competence. The former appears as caste pride and prejudice, and latter in the reservation to permit Śūdras and outcastes from Vedānta studies. These are issues he will return to throughout his tour of India the following year. See *CWSV* 3: 245-6; 295-7 'Vedānta and Indian Life;' 'The Future of India.'

In 'Vedānta and Privilege,' he states, 'the work of Advaita... is to break down all these privileges... It is the hardest work of all, and curious to say, it has been less active than anywhere else in the land of its birth [India]. If there is any land of privilege, it is the land which gave birth to this philosophy—privilege for the spiritual man as well as for the man of birth. There they have not so much privilege for money (that is one of the benefits, I think) but privilege for birth and spirituality is everywhere.' *CWSV*

Vivekananda would come to reject the necessity of such qualifications and to view their maintenance as an extension of Brahmanical bias.¹⁴⁰ And like Roy, Vivekananda appealed to Śaṅkara's writings to support his claims for 'religious and soteriological egalitarianism.'¹⁴¹ However, as Halbfass notes, Roy's treatment of Śaṅkara avoided those problematic texts like BS 1.3.33-38 that clearly show Śaṅkara supporting the need for qualification and the scriptural non-qualification of Śūdras from study.¹⁴² Vivekananda takes a different approach in his treatment of Śaṅkara, and in doing so he positions himself outside of traditional Advaita thinking and understanding on the subject of qualification and in turn the practice of Advaitic study.

In a letter to Pramadadas Mitra (cited previously above), Vivekananda demonstrates a familiarity with Śaṅkara's *Brahmasūtra Bhāṣya* (Commentary on the Brahma Sutras [BSBh]) as he struggles to make sense of Śaṅkara's rigidity regarding Śūdra study.¹⁴³ He follows the *pūrvapakṣa* (objection) within the commentary and focuses his own question/objection on the possible inconsistency in using a quotation from the *Taittiriya Samhita* (Tai. S.) VII.i.1.6 that states, 'Therefore the Śūdra is unfit for performing sacrifices,' to prohibit Śūdras from studying also the Veda. The objection offered in BSBh 1.3.34 begins:

I.425. This would be a secondary, but practical objective of Advaita born from the primary objective of inculcating right knowledge.

¹⁴⁰ In 'Future of India,' Vivekananda states, 'To the Brahmins I appeal, that they must work hard to raise the Indian people by teaching them what they know, by giving out the culture that they have accumulated over the centuries. It is clearly the duty of Brahmins of India to remember what real Brahminhood is. As Manu says, all these privileges and honors are given to the Brahmin, because "with him is the treasury of virtue." He must open the treasury and distribute its valuables to the world.' *CWSV* 3.297, 'The Future of India,' (1897).

¹⁴¹ Halbfass, 'Rammohan Roy,' 206.

¹⁴² Ibid. Halbfass extends this observation to include other, unnamed, modern thinkers. He states, 'Naturally, this is passage that representatives of Neo-Vedanta tend to pass over without comment.' Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection*, 380. As we will see below, Vivekananda is an exception.

¹⁴³ *CWSV* 6.208-9, 'Epistle VII, Pramadadas Mitra, 8.7.1889).

Now, then, the apparent conclusion is that a Sudra also is qualified (*adhikāra*), for he can have the aspiration (*arthiva*) and ability (*sāmarthya*). And unlike the prohibition ... (Tai. S. VII.i.1.6) no prohibition against his acquisition of illumination (*vidya*) is met with. From the objector's view, a prohibition against performing sacrifice is not a prohibition against or disqualification from acquiring knowledge.

Both the objection and Vivekananda draw upon Śaṅkara's earlier commentary on *atha* ('next') in the opening sutra of the BS, '*athāto brahmajijñāsā*' (Hence [now], thereafter [then] a deliberation on Brahman [desire to know Brahman]) (BS I.1.1).¹⁴⁴ In his explanation Śaṅkara replies to an objection that rites precede knowledge—that thing which necessarily comes before a 'next' thing. He responds, 'Not so, since it is logically possible for a man who has studied the Upanishads to undertake deliberation on Brahman even without deliberation on religious rites' (BSBh I.1.1).¹⁴⁵ It would appear then that any reference to a text concerning ritual performance would have little bearing on acquiring knowledge of Brahman. They are 'distinct topics and there is no necessary connection between the two.'¹⁴⁶

Using Śaṅkara's comments in I.1.1, Vivekananda writes:

But the same Acharya contends with reference to [BS I.1.1] that the word *atha* here does not mean 'subsequent to the study of the Vedas,' because it is contrary to proof that the study of the Upanishad is not permissible without the previous study of the Vedic Mantras and *Brāhmanas* and because there is no intrinsic sequence between the Vedic Karma-Kanda (ceremonial portions) and Vedic Jñāna-Kanda (knowledge portions). It is evident therefore, that one may attain to the knowledge of Brahman without having studied the ceremonial portions of the Veda. So if there is no sequence between the sacrificial practice and Jnana, why does the Acharya contradict his statement when it is the case of the Shudras, by

¹⁴⁴ The bracketed translation is Clooney's in *Theology after Vedānta*. His captures the desiderative conjugation of the verb 'to know' rendering it a desire/wish to know. This is how Śaṅkara also explains the meaning of the word later in I.1.1. Clooney adds that in Uttara Mīmāṃsā the desire to know is accompanied by 'the activity which brings about the desired knowledge.' Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta*, 129-130. This coupling will be critical for understanding how Vivekananda breaks from Advaita Vedānta understood as Uttara Mīmāṃsā.

¹⁴⁵ For concise treatment of Śaṅkara's commentary on '*atha*' see Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta*, 237-8 n.28.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 237.

inserting the clause ‘by force of logic’ (*nyāyasya sādharmaṇatvāt*)? [BSBh 1.3.34]
Why should the Shudra not study the Upanishad?¹⁴⁷

Given Śaṅkara’s earlier comment in the opening sutra, and the immediate focus of the objection in this sutra, one can understand the emphasis Vivekananda places upon the use of this seemingly incongruent citation. For him the ‘force of logic’ seems quite forced. What he does not comment upon, and which would perhaps answer his question, is Śaṅkara’s opening reply to the objector.¹⁴⁸ Śaṅkara states:

Faced with this, we say: the Sudra has no competence (*adhikāra*), since he cannot study the Vedas; for one becomes competent for things spoken of in the Vedas, after one has studied the Vedas and known these things from them. But there can be no reading of the Vedas by a Sudra, for Vedic study presupposes the investiture with the sacred thread, which ceremony has confined to the three castes.

The response offered is simple and straightforward; Śūdras do not possess the necessary competence to study the Vedas because the Vedas exclude them.¹⁴⁹ Here the ‘force of logic’ or ‘shared or in common logic’ of this quotation on ritual is that the Vedas do not admit Śūdra competence to undertake either ritual or study.¹⁵⁰ The use of this citation then does not contradict Śaṅkara’s earlier comment on BS I.1.1.

Another possible way of understanding Vivekananda’s continued objection, ‘Why should the Shudra not study the Upanishad,’ even after Śaṅkara’s opening reply could be

¹⁴⁷ *CWSV* 6.209.

¹⁴⁸ Vivekananda would have had to read through this portion of the commentary to arrive at the problematic citation.

¹⁴⁹ Clooney notes that in the Advaitin tradition, the lack of competence does not mean lack of capacity. Citing Vacaspati Misra’s commentary on Śaṅkara’s commentary, he states, ‘Vacaspati Misra (commenting on 1.3.34) offers some interesting comments in discussing Śaṅkara’s positions. First, he concedes that the śūdra, like the brahmin, has the natural (*nija*) abilities on needs to learn and meditate; the can her, think, reflect, etc. He adds, however what Śūdras do lack are the adventitious or extrinsic (*āgantuka*) qualifications which one acquires later on, such as initiation, study with a guru simply because they are excluded from these by the Veda itself. Exclusion is not a question of literacy or intelligence, but of the way meditation is circumscribed with restriction in the texts about it.’ Francis X. Clooney, S.J. ‘Finding One’s Place in the Text: A Look at the theological Treatment of Caste in Traditional India,’ *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 17.1 (1989): 12.

¹⁵⁰ See also Mīmāṃsā Sūtras VI.1.25-37 in which Śūdras are barred from the performance of most sacrifices because they are barred from learning Sanskrit.

that he misunderstood the import of ‘subsequent to the study of Vedas.’ Śaṅkara’s argument is that the study of the Vedas cannot be the prerequisite for *brahmajijñāsā* because study is shared with *dharmajijñāsā* (the desire to know dharma, deliberation on dharma). If study was the prerequisite then the distinction between the two undertakings could collapse rendering it necessary to pursue knowledge of Brahman only after pursuing knowledge of *dharma*.¹⁵¹ In splitting the *karma-kāṇḍa* and *jñāna-kāṇḍa* portions of the Vedas, Vivekananda distinguishes the former, the performance of which cannot be undertaken by Śūdras (Tai. S. VII.1.1.6), from the latter—seemingly not prohibited by this citation. This second body of texts he identifies as the Upaniṣads, and may be distinguishing the Upaniṣads as separate from the whole of the Vedas, and not just the ceremonial parts, and positing them as texts that Śūdras can study. Whatever his reasoning for continuing to push the question even after Śaṅkara’s straightforward response, Vivekananda displays confusion about and perhaps dissatisfaction with Śaṅkara’s prohibition. Nevertheless, he is for now trying to think through and with Śaṅkara.

Pramadadas Mitra’s reply to this letter has not been preserved in the *Complete Works*, but they do contain Vivekananda’s response to his reply. Vivekananda writes, ‘About one amongst my several questions [four in total] to which you sent your replies,

¹⁵¹ This is a very fine and formal distinction, perhaps analogous to the langue of procession in the Trinity. Śaṅkara states, ‘The mere fact of the study of the Vedas cannot be the prerequisite sought for here, since this is a common factor (in both the cases of deliberation on Brahman and religious rites).’ The opponent replies, ‘A previous understanding of the religious rites can be accepted here as a special factor (leading to deliberation on Brahman). To which he responds, ‘Not so, since it is logically possible for a man who has studied the Upaniṣads to undertake a deliberation on Brahman even without deliberation on religious rites. And no sequence is meant here between these two like the procedural arrangement in the matter of taking up the heart etc., where an order is enjoined, for there is no proof either establishing a proof between these two like that between the whole and its parts, or showing any derivative competence’ (BSBh I.1.1). Though there is no prerequisite here, it does not mean that the performance of religious rites are without benefit or are not necessary for one in whom desire for knowledge of Brahman has not yet arisen. See BS III.4.26-7.

my wrong idea is corrected.’¹⁵² Whether or not this question now-made-clear regards Śūdra competence cannot be determined without conjecture. However, if Mitra responded in a way that corrected Vivekananda’s wrong understanding on this matter, the re-questioning whether Śaṅkara understands *varṇa* to be based on hereditary or quality (*guṇa*)¹⁵³—what Halbfass calls ethical, characterological, and nonhereditary—would make sense.¹⁵⁴ Should this be the case—both that the question answered is on Śūdra competence and that Śaṅkara understands *varṇa* to be determined by quality—then Vivekananda could accept that Śūdras’ do not have the requisite competency while also maintaining that Sudrahood is neither determined by birth nor a fixed identity—as a quality-based understanding of *varṇa* allows for fluidity all of which would be seemingly in harmony with Śaṅkara’s own position.¹⁵⁵

In this same letter, Vivekananda offers his own understanding of *varṇa* as quality-based. He writes:

I have not doubt that according to the ancient view in this country, caste was hereditary...As for myself, I have no partiality in this caste question, because I know it is a social law and is based on diversity of Guna and Karma. It also means grave harm if one bent on going beyond Guna and Karma cherishes in mind any caste distinctions.¹⁵⁶

That Vivekananda knows that the hereditary understanding of caste is social one and therefore not a religious one, suggests a conviction on the matter that will not be

¹⁵² *CWSV* 6.210 ‘Epistle IX,’ 8.17.1889.’

¹⁵³ Vivekananda’s first and third question to Mitra also seeks answers on hereditary or *guṇa* based understanding of caste.

¹⁵⁴ Halbfass, ‘Homo Hierarchicus,’ *Tradition and Reflection*, 381. He finds this understanding of caste to be typical of Neo-Vedanta, and it is how Vivekananda understands *varṇa*.

¹⁵⁵ For Śaṅkara it may not be an either/or between hereditary and quality as study is the matter. Being born a Brahmin is necessary, but not sufficient in itself.

¹⁵⁶ *CWSV* 6.210. Again we do not have Mitra’s original response, but having received this question along with twelve more, he advises Vivekananda, in V.’s words, ‘to give up arguing and disputing.’ *CWSV* 6.214, ‘Epistle X,’ 9.2.1889.

easily overturned, even upon evidence that Śaṅkara thinks differently.¹⁵⁷ And so we find with the development of his Vedānta a respect for Śaṅkara coupled with a distancing from him. For him Śaṅkara was the great Advaita philosopher, whose teachings make known the truth of Vedānta. However, while he possessed of a strong mind, powerful intellect, he lacked a great heart.¹⁵⁸ In his latter writings such qualifications about Śaṅkara's character would become more frequent and follow this pattern. Śaṅkara the philosopher would be lifted to an exalted position within the pantheon of India's great thinkers—the greatest amongst the great. However compared to the Buddha, Ramanuja, or Caitanya—with whose social views Śaṅkara's were frequently compared—his love and compassion for all persons was found wanting. Over time this tension between Śaṅkara's two sides grew more taut for Vivekananda. While it never broke, Vivekananda

¹⁵⁷ Again in his original letter to Mitra, Vivekananda focuses in on the key texts from the BS that discuss Śūdra competence and *varṇa* identification. In his first question to Mitra he asks, 'Does any narrative occur about Satyakāma, son of Jabālā, and about Jānashruti, anywhere else in Vedas excepting the Upanishads.' *CWSV* 6.208. Both individuals and their questionable *varṇa* identification figure prominently in the BS's and Śaṅkara's understanding of competency. Jānashruti is referenced in BS 1.3.34-35 and *Satyakāma* in 1.3.37. Both are selected by BS because they would seem to support Śūdra competency—Jānashruti is called a Śūdra by Raikva and Satyakāma does not know who his father is. The BS and Śaṅkara handle Jānashruti's case with an etymological derivation of Śūdra as one who runs (*√dru*) with sorrow (*śucā*) or as one who is overrun by sorrow. While ingenious, this construction is extra-textual to the account in *Chāndogya* Upaniṣad (CH) 4.1-3, we do not know the exact disposition of Jānashruti only that he wants to meet Raikva. Nevertheless, despite being called a Śūdra, Jānashruti was in fact Kṣatriya owing to his heritage. Satyakāma's *varṇa* identity is more ambiguous. He does not know his father and therefore knows neither his heritage or *varṇa*. Ultimately his true Brahmin identity is made known, when he speaks honestly of his *varṇa* ignorance. As Gautama, his soon-to-be instructor, states, 'No non-Brāhmaṇa could can dare utter such truth. O amiable one, bring sacrificial faggot, I shall initiate you because you did not depart from truth' CH 4.4.5. Śaṅkara comments, 'When owing to the utterance of truth, the absence of Shudrahood had been established then Gautama precedes to initiate and instruct Jābāla (Satyakāma)' BSBh 1.1.37. The import here is that only after determining Satyakāma's competency did Gautama begin the initiation. Both these selections from the *Chāndogya* Upaniṣad would initially seem to set precedent for Śūdra competency, and their inclusion in BS makes sense—as both to clarify the text and delineate competency. Satyakāma is an especially important figure for Neo-Vedanta figures, Vivekananda included, because his *varṇa* identity could be understood to be based on quality (ethical) grounds due to his honesty. That is his Brahmin status derives from his honesty. Śaṅkara renders the meaning to be Satyakāma's honesty derives from his Brahmin identity, and not that reverse. Here he follows the Vedic understanding that 'one is a brahmin if born into a family traditionally described as 'brahmin.' Clooney, 'Finding One's Place,' 11.

¹⁵⁸ Vivekananda states, 'Shankara with his great intellect, I am afraid, had not a great heart. *CWSV* 3.265, 'Great Sages of India.'

dissatisfaction with Śaṅkara increased. This sentiment is especially evident in a dialogue with a student, whom according to the diarist, was a ‘great adherent of Śaṅkara, almost to the point of fanaticism. He used to look upon Śaṅkara’s Advaita philosophy as the crest of all philosophies.’ He continues:

Swamiji was aware of this and, as was his wont, wanted to break this one-sidedness of the disciple.

Swamiji: Shankara’s intellect was sharp like the razor. He was a good arguer and scholar, no doubt, but he had no great liberality in his heart; his heart seems to have been like that. Besides, he used to take great pride in his Brahminism—much like a Southern Brahmin of the priest class you might say. How he has defended in his commentary on the Vedānta-Sūtras that the non-Brahmin castes will not attain to supreme knowledge of Brahman! And what specious arguments! Referring to Vidura he has said that he became a knower of Brahman by reason of his Brahmin body in the previous incarnation. Well, if nowadays any Shudra attains to a knowledge of Brahman, shall we have to side with Shankara and maintain that because he had been a Brahmin in a previous birth, therefore he attained to this knowledge? Goodness!¹⁵⁹

Despite his appreciation for Śaṅkara the philosopher, Vivekananda ultimately could not accept Śaṅkara’s views on either *varṇa* or *adhikāra*. Vivekananda’s understanding of *varṇa* based on quality and ethical character allowed him to view it as mutable. He provides the examples of Vasiṣṭha, Nārada, Satyakāma Jābāla, Vyāsa, Kripa, Drona, and Karna as examples of persons of ‘questionable parentage’ and so of indeterminate or low *varṇa* status who were ‘raised to the position of Brahmin or Kshatriya, in virtue of their superior learning or valour.’¹⁶⁰ If, like Śaṅkara, one views competency to be dependent upon *varṇa* and particularly on what *varṇa* grants, i.e. access to the Vedas, a dynamic understanding of *varṇa* would allow for competency to be attained through change rather than to be gained simply by one’s birth.

¹⁵⁹ *CWSV* 7.117-8, ‘Observations and Dialogues II, 1898.’

¹⁶⁰ *CWSV* 4.469, ‘Modern India,’ (3.1899). He laments the fact that this change in *varṇa* for the individual did nothing for the uplift of the *jāti* to which they were born.

Such fluidity complicates things. The *Brahma Sūtra* and Śaṅkara's commentary sought clarity on the matter of *adhikāra* and were concerned less about restriction than on ensuring that the end of inquiry about Brahman would culminate in the realization of Brahman. From a scriptural standpoint, learning that is based on birth adhered to the statements in the law books, *smṛti*, and *Dharmaśāstra*. From a practical standpoint, it allowed qualifying competency to be easily identifiable. Vivekananda's framework introduces ambiguity, which threatens the efficacy of inquiry, so long as *adhikāra* relates to *varṇa*. Unsurprisingly, Vivekananda ultimately rejects competency on this ground, instead locating competency in the infinite capacity of each individual's true self.

The unambiguously titled talk, 'The Evils of Adhikaravada,' Vivekananda begins, 'With all my respects for the Rishis of yore I cannot but denounce their method in instructing the people.' Launching into what the recorder called a vehement 'pointing out of the evils that resulted from these special rights or privileges,' he continues:

This method was pernicious to the very core; and instead of enabling men to attain the end, it laid upon their shoulders a mass of meaningless nonsense. Their excuse for keeping the end hidden from their view was that people could not have understood their real meaning even if they had presented it to them, not being worthy recipients. The Adhikaravada is the outcome of pure selfishness. They knew that by this enlightenment on their special subject they would lose their superior positions of instructors to the people... These advocates of Adhikaravada ignored the tremendous fact of the infinite possibilities of the human soul. Every man is capable of receiving knowledge if it is imparted in his own language. A teacher who cannot convince others should weep on account of his inability to teach the people in their own language, instead of cursing them and dooming them to live in ignorance and superstition, setting up the plea that the higher knowledge is not for them.¹⁶¹

Here *adhikāra* is presented as a privilege granted to a select few solely for the preservation of power and prestige.¹⁶² More so, it functions as a means to exclude the

¹⁶¹ *CWSV* 5.262-3, 'The Evils of Adhikaravada,' (undated).

¹⁶² Vivekananda's critique here is not dissimilar to that of Western missionaries.

masses from enlightenment. Vivekananda argues that every individual possesses competency to learn liberating knowledge on account of his or her very nature. Skill may be needed to realize this knowledge, but this skill should reside with the teacher and not the student. The ideal teacher possesses the mind of Śaṅkara coupled with heart of the Buddha. This teacher would be capable of taking the product of Śaṅkara's and Advaita's inquiry and skillfully transmitting/translating this teaching to meet the needs of the each student. Failure to convey liberating knowledge is the instructor's fault. *Adhikāra* regulations excuse poor pedagogy by excluding the majority of students, especially the difficult ones. According to Vivekananda, no student should be left behind.

Vivekananda's counter-conception of competency may come close to merging it with capacity. Whether the human soul confers competency necessarily or the infinite possibilities refer to latent maximal capacity to reason intelligently in the end may be an unnecessary distinction—the bar for qualification has been set so low because the true nature of the self is so high. It is, however, an important distinction for Śaṅkara. Recalling the objector's position in BSBh I.3.34, Śaṅkara does not deny that a Śūdra could possess capacity or aspiration (the desire for liberation). Nevertheless, capacity and aspiration do not grant necessarily competency, and so Śūdras cannot study the Upaniṣads. Vivekananda may dismiss competency as a social convention forced upon a religious matter, but in doing so he distinguishes himself not only from Śaṅkara, but also from Advaita Vedānta as it is understood to be not just a nondual way of understanding the world, but a particular mode of inquiry that allows for this realization to be realized.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ He states, 'they try to make compromises between the real eternal truths and nonsensical prejudices of the people.' Ibid., 264.

In respects to theory, while there are clear differences between Vivekananda and Śaṅkara, they are not without similarity. Both champion Advaita, and Vivekananda aims to align his views as closely as he can with Śaṅkara. However, as their distinct treatments of *adhikāra* suggest, they do have different opinions on certain matters, and these differences occur often at the practical level—practical meaning practice. Practical Vedānta necessitates adjustments to Advaita Vedānta either outside the scope of immediate inquiry—in the case of ethical, social engagement with the world—or untenable to it—in the case of universal competency to engage in such inquiry. It is a different kind of project equipped with a different set of practices. Despite these differences, they do address the same subject, Brahman, and hope for the same end, providing a capable method for right knowledge and realization.

Conclusion

This chapter began by presenting an intellectual biography of Swami Vivekananda that located him within the vibrant, creative, reforming, and reviving context of late 19th c. Bengal. As an intellectual and spiritual seeker, Vivekananda frequented many of Kolkata's social-religious organizations and found himself—figuratively and literally—at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna. Under the guidance and touch of his Master, Vivekananda entered into various states of samādhi and took up the study of Advaita Vedānta. Following the death of Ramakrishna, he left the community and travelled throughout India as itinerant monk. At the southern most reaches of the subcontinent at Cape Comorin he had an experience that called him to gather together his brother disciples to engage in social and spiritual services for the uplift of the Indian masses. In order to raise

funds for this new undertaking, he traveled to the United States. It was in the United States and the United Kingdom that he began to articulate his vision of Vedānta: one that was both synthetic and practical.

Although acknowledging an indebtedness to Śaṅkara's understanding of Advaita Vedānta—especially a non-dualistic understanding of ontology and anthropology—Practical Vedanta nevertheless constituted a major shift in methodology. Vivekananda sought to make the truths of Śaṅkara's system accessible and intelligible to all persons. A synthetic Vedānta, similar to Sri Ramakrishna's staircase or to pre-British Raj doxographies, allowed differing philosophical and religious systems to be collected and codified so as to culminate in the apex of Advaita.¹⁶⁴ Here each tradition offers genuine truth, but they do so in a qualified way. They are true dependently in so far as they are supported by, reflect, and lead to the highest truth of Advaita. Independently they are incomplete, a lower rung on the ladder of truth. Vivekananda believed that by demonstrating the synthetic relationship among the great plurality of practices, philosophies, and theologies he could create unity amidst diversity. All persons could ascend the ladder towards advaitic realization; all persons could be gathered under that 'mighty banner of Advaita.'¹⁶⁵

This synthetic reorganization of Hinduism had practical purposes as well. Vivekananda objected to the strict qualifications that limited advaita, and so liberation, to a select, privileged few. A synthetic understanding of Vedānta meant that all persons, regardless of the rung upon which the currently stood, could gradually advance towards

¹⁶⁴ For Vivekananda these differing philosophies and religious traditions included both Indian and Western. While these traditions offer genuine truth, they do so in a qualified way. They are true dependently as they are supported by and lead to the highest truth of Advaita.

¹⁶⁵ *CWSV* 3.430, 'The Vedanta' (Lahore, 12 November 1897).

advaitic realization and liberation. Moreover, he stressed that non-dualism possessed not only spiritual import, but ethical and social implications as well. Differences between persons—religious, caste, economic—are ultimately accidental and only relatively real. Realizing, and more importantly working to realize, one’s true identity as being non-different to Brahman meant also recognizing this to be true of other persons. Privilege and prejudice ensnare one in ignorance, reifying false understandings of the self and stymying the fruition of liberative knowledge. So do experiences of oppression and stigmatization. To overcome these deeply entrenched hindrances to liberation, Vivekananda wedded the social and spiritual. Practical Vedanta came to mean both that Vedānta ought to be capable of affecting societal transformation and that social practices ought to engender advaitic realization. The synthetic and practical dimensions of Vivekananda’s Vedānta coalesced in the practice of jīva sevā (service to beings).

Chapter Four

Jīva Sevā: Swami Vivekananda's Program of Social and Spiritual Uplift

Introduction

This chapter will present the development and content of Swami Vivekananda's understanding of jīva sevā as a practice that leads to the advaitic experience of non-difference. The first half of the chapter examines the influences upon Vivekananda during the period in which the idea of sevā began to take shape. These include the example and teachings of his master Sri Ramakrishna, his experiences as a monk wandering India, and his travels to the United States where he encountered the Christian Social Gospel Movement. This half concludes by examining the period between 1893 and the end of 1894 in which sevā became established gradually as the practice and mission of the Ramakrishna Community and in which Vivekananda began to differentiate sevā (service) from *dayā* (compassion).

The second half of this chapter will explore the theological and anthropological significance of this shift in language. It will argue that Vivekananda was reflecting upon and reworking a Vaiṣṇava understanding of sevā. In order to draw out the similarities and differences between the two, it will present this Vaiṣṇava model focusing especially on the service a devotee renders to the Vaiṣṇava community. Here the distinction between service and compassion as understood by both the Vaiṣṇava communities and Vivekananda will be made clear. The chapter concludes with a presentation of sevā as a *sādhana* (practice) that leads to advaitic experience. The framing of this final section will

incorporate Dalit theology's language of identity affirmation and a liberative social vision.

The Origins of Jīva Sevā

Much like Practical Vedanta's eclectic foundations, Vivekananda's development of jīva sevā proves to be an amalgamation of a great many influences. His early days as a Brāhmo Samaj associate, his formative experiences under the guidance of Ramakrishna, his wonderings as a *parivrajaka*, and his tour through the United States all shaped his understanding of sevā. A robust program of social service developed gradually and only emerged as a major aspect of Vivekananda's public teaching in the mid 1890's—at the tail end of his Western tour and during his campaign through India. With a greater emphasis on the practical side of Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda required a complementing practice lest it too become a mere abstraction.¹

¹ Gwilym Beckerlegge does well in problematizing a simple, direct link between sevā and Practical Vedanta. Aware that this has been the popular reception and portrayal of Vivekananda within the Ramakrishna community, he cites Swami Narottamananda who notes that 'the basic principle [of Practical Vedanta] is service to humanity; to remove at all costs the sorrow and misery of others with a feeling of oneness with the them.' Swami Narottamananda, *Home of Service: A Retrospect* (Varanasi: Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service, 1982), 40. Likewise he provides Sister Gargi's (Marie Louise Burke) emphasis that sevā and Practical Vedanta constitute a twofold, but nonetheless unified mission of Vivekananda. Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, p. 208. Beckerlegge points to the Cape Comorin experience and the subsequent letter Vivekananda sent to his brothers in March 1894 as revealing a plan of sevā taking shape prior to an exposition on Practical Vedanta. He concludes, 'it would seem that Vivekananda was either prevented from achieving, or chose not to, or failed to, achieve an integrated systematization of his ideas concerning organized sevā and Practical Vedanta. These two projects relate to different phases of his life and were largely developed in relationship to different audiences and, to an extent, different cohorts of devotees. Signs of a lack of final integration, perhaps, should not be surprising.' Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, pp. 210-11.

Service, nevertheless, remains an integral part of Vivekananda presentation of Practical Vedanta especially his talks on Vedānta in India, and as it will be demonstrated below, his later conception of service necessarily presupposes the anthropological framework he establishes through Practical Vedanta. Though not explicitly stated, Practical Vedanta implicitly provides the metaphysical foundation. The overlap of conceptual language suggests that even for a less than strenuous systematician like Vivekananda integration between the two is present. Here, I think Beckerlegge desires to draw a distinction between a necessary *sādhana* of service and Practical Vedanta. Vivekananda is more ambiguous on this necessary relationship while the Ramakrishna Math understands it to be central to their mission.

Bengali groups like the Brāhmo Samaj and their social reform efforts captured the hearts of many young *bhadralok* like Vivekananda. Their emphasis on modernization and education are present throughout Vivekananda's efforts, which sought to couple secular and spiritual instruction. His focus on the latter too followed those like Keshub Chunder Sen who, dissatisfied with the increasingly rationalistic aspects of the movement, advocated a more ecstatic and religious component to their movement. The Brāhmo Samaj and other like-minded organizations fostered an atmosphere in Bengal conducive to social engagement. Criticism coming from Christian missionaries required response, and these organizations created a base within the burgeoning middle class caste communities to address their challenges primarily at the local level. Vivekananda expanded these localized programs, and through the nascent Ramakrishna Movement he and his fellow *sanyassins* and *gurubhais* worked to found and fund social programs at the national level.

The degree to which the impetus for *jīva sevā* can be directly attributed to Sri Ramakrishna himself is a matter contested between members of the movement and scholars. Similar to the Math's presentation of Ramakrishna to be thoroughly advaitic in his thinking, the community identifies the origins of programmatic social service in his teachings and example. Scholars outside the community, however, locate Vivekananda's development of *sevā* on a wide spectrum that Beckerlegge identifies as ranging from broad continuity to deviation.² The question of continuity stems from the absence of any direct mandate from Ramakrishna commissioning his disciples to engage in organized

² Beckerlegge, *The Ramakrishna Mission*, pp. 45, 48-9. Beckerlegge notes that Ramakrishna community ranges from 'simple,' i.e. direct continuity to innovation, which acknowledges Vivekananda's own contribution to the practice while trusting also in Vivekananda as 'the chosen and most authoritative interpreter of Ramakrishna's message.' Beckerlegge notes also that it is only 'outsiders' (scholars unaffiliated with the community) who view Vivekananda as deviating from his master's teaching.

social service. His laconic command to Vivekananda ‘to teach my boys’ and ‘to keep them together’ while granting interpretive authority to him, created also the opportunity for innovation.³ Innovation, though, does not necessarily imply discontinuity as scholars like N. P. Sil, and, in a more qualified way, J. Rosselli suggest.⁴

The argument for discontinuity between Ramakrishna and Vivekananda on the importance of sevā draws primarily on the relegated place service holds in relation to spirituality in Ramakrishna’s thinking. Rosselli states, ‘[Ramakrishna] always put the realization of God first as a goal and deliberately subordinated to it any service of man.’⁵ This sentiment is expressed most prominently in his interactions with the Brāhmo reformers who visited him. Out of context, his criticism against the philanthropic and reforming activities of the Brāhmos might be construed as a general dismissal service. However, it is important to note that his challenge to them was that of an instructor to a pupil, a corrective offered by a teacher to a disciple who was seeking guidance.

Ramakrishna’s critique focused on intention and agency. Rosselli notes that, ‘the Brāhmos’ “worldliness” in his eyes was confirmed by their search for advancement and

³ Swami Saradananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna and contemporary of Vivekananda, identifies early in the community’s life the special interpretative role that Vivekananda played. He writes, ‘But as unfortunate as we were, we could not comprehend the implication of [Ramakrishna’s] words. It was the surprisingly intelligent Narendranath who understood those divine words as far as it was humanly possible and expressed from time to time their sublime significance to our amazement.’ Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, trans. Swami Jagadananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1952), 818-819.

⁴ More so than Jeffery Kripal, N. P. Sil and his scholarship have been a thorn in the side of the Ramakrishna community. His efforts to demythologize both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda by contrasting hagiography with available biography are welcomed. However, one gets a feeling that Sil perhaps relishes too much his role in deconstructing saintly identities. See N. P. Sil, *Ramakrishna Paramahansa: A Psychological Profile* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1991), *Swami Vivekananda: A Reassessment* (1997), and ‘Vivekananda’s Ramakrishna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda,’ *Numen* 40.1 (1993). J. Rosselli, ‘Sri Ramakrishna and the Educated Elite of Late Nineteenth-century Bengal,’ *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 12.2 (1978).

⁵ Rosselli, 207. Quoted in Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 98. Subordination does not imply as Sil suggests that Ramakrishna was ‘antisocial or at least asocial.’ Sil, *Ramakrishna Paramahansa*, 19.

“respectability” within the framework of norms imposed by the British.’⁶ This intention, a mimetic response to Western and Christian ideals, ultimately rendered such activity as ego-driven and attached to the fruits of action. Ramakrishna further stressed the importance of realizing the true agent behind all action: God. Again to a Brāhmo audience, he states, ‘you people speak of doing good to the world. Is the world such a small thing? And who are you, pray, to do good to the world? First realize God, see Him by means of spiritual discipline. If he imparts power, then you do good to others; otherwise not.’⁷ For Ramakrishna the primacy of spiritual discipline buffers one against misguided intention and a puffed-up sense of agency—protecting one from the selfish pride that might accompany good works.

His advice to the Brāhmo philanthropist Shambu Charan Mallik reveals that Ramakrishna advised an opportunistic approach to performing service. If an opportunity presented itself, it could be pursued. However, one was not seek out opportunities for service at the expense of spiritual development.⁸ Ramakrishna also demonstrates wariness towards organizations and institutions dedicated to social service projects. Concerning hospitals and dispensaries, he states:

Hospitals, dispensaries, and other such things are unreal. God alone is real and else is unreal. Furthermore, after realizing God one feels that He alone is the Doer and we are but his instruments. Then why should we forget Him and destroy ourselves by being involved in too many activities? After realizing Him, one may, though His grace, become His instrument in building many hospitals and dispensaries.⁹

⁶ Rosselli, 204. Quoted in Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, p. 99.

⁷ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 142.

⁸ To Shambu Charan Mallik, Ramakrishna advises, ‘do not go out of your way to for such works. Undertake only those works that present themselves to you and are of pressing necessity—and those also in the spirit of detachment. It is not good to become involved in many activities.’ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 142.

⁹ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 453.

Such instruction would seem to run against the mission of the Ramakrishna Movement under the leadership of Vivekananda and latter community presidents. While Vedānta centers in the West function more as institutions of religious education and spiritual formation—perhaps more in line with Ramakrishna’s teaching—Ramakrishna centers in India are engaged in numerous service-oriented projects like schools and hospitals.¹⁰ The final sentence of his instruction is key to interpreting Ramakrishna’s view towards organized service. Only after God realization should such projects be undertaken. He is not so much against them as he wishes to properly situate them in relation to spiritual practice. However, even in allowing for their proper place, one cannot so easily dismiss his general skeptical view of organized service.

To support the claim that Ramakrishna commissioned service broadly, the early Ramakrishna Community turned to his examples and sayings for precedent. Alongside smaller scale, individual acts of compassion—teaching a disciple how to read, washing a latrine—the two most frequently cited examples from his life are the village feedings at Deoghar (1868) and Ranaghat in (1870). Moved by the compassion he felt for the villagers suffering in the wake of a severe famine, Ramakrishna urged Mathur Babu, who was accompanying him on a pilgrimage to Allahabad, Varanasi, and Vrindaban, to supply food and clothing to the residents of Deoghar as well as suspend his pilgrimage to ensure the needs of the village were met.¹¹ Noting the infrequency with which Ramakrishna himself referenced these events, Gwilym Beckerlegge argues that the early

¹⁰ Data released by the Belur Math for 2011-12 shows the notable reach of Ramakrishna Math service programs. More than eight million patients visited sponsored hospitals, three hundred and fifty thousand students received educational and vocational instruction, five hundred thousand attended programs of cultural education, one hundred thousand clean water projects were undertaken, and five hundred thousand washing and sanitation projects were completed. From <http://www.belurmath.org/activities.htm>. These programs and their numbers demonstrate well the dedication the community has to organized social programs.

¹¹ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 84.

community perhaps imbued these incidents with a greater significance in an effort to establish an exemplary precedent.¹² Furthermore, these acts do appear to be more in accord with Ramakrishna's service of opportunity rather than institutionalized service.

While actions may speak louder than words, it is to the sayings of Ramakrishna that Vivekananda turned to when advocating sevā. The first of these sayings is more pragmatic than it is spiritual: 'religion is not for empty stomachs.' Although it is not directly recorded by any of Ramakrishna's biographers, Vivekananda refers to this teaching often in his conversations and correspondences with his brother disciples. The most notable example comes in his letter to Ramakrishnanada, who had a close relationship with Ramakrishna, in March 1894. This is the same letter in which Vivekananda begins to reveal his plan for India and in which he relates his transformative experience at Cape Comorin. Appealing directly to the words and memory of Ramakrishna, he writes, 'did not our Gurudeva use to say, "And empty stomach is no good for religion?"'¹³ The quotation's placement adjacent to Vivekananda's experience might imply that it was his reflection upon this particular statement that triggered his awakening to sevā, or it could simply be a rhetorical reference urging Ramakrishnanada and his brothers to support this undertaking. Regardless, it was meaningful to Vivekananda and he expected it to carry weight with his brothers.

The second teaching from Ramakrishna that Vivekananda invokes especially informs the spiritual and religious aspects of sevā. Saradananda records an incident that occurred at Dakshineswar in 1884 where Vivekananda was present. He narrates:

There arose the topic of Vaishnava religion in the course of conversation and, explaining briefly the essence of that doctrine to all, the Master said, 'That

¹² Ibid., 88.

¹³ *CWSV* 6:254 'Epistle XLI, Ramakrishnanada,' (19 March, 1894, Chicago).

doctrine teaches that one should always be careful to observe three things, namely, a taste for God's name, kindness to all beings and the worship of Vaishnavas. God is what the name is; knowing non-difference between the name and the possessor of the name, one should always take His name with love and devotion; knowing the identity always respect, worship and salute holy men, the devotees; and one should have the conviction in one's heart that the whole universe belongs to Krishna; therefore, compassion for all beings is what one should practice.' No sooner had he uttered the words, 'compassion for all beings,' than he suddenly went into ecstasy. Regaining partial consciousness in a short time, he continued, 'Talk of compassion for beings! Will you, all little animals, bestow compassion on beings? You wretch, who are you to bestow it? No, no; not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva.' All went on listening to these words of the Master spoken in that ecstatic mood; but none could detect and understand their hidden import at the time. It was Narendranath alone who, coming out of the room at the end of the Master's ecstasy said, 'Ah, What a wonderful light have I got today from the Master's words.'¹⁴

As Saradananda recounts, the meaning of this final statement, 'not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva,' befuddled all those present except Vivekananda. Interestingly, the disciples did not ask Ramakrishna to explain its import, but instead allowed Vivekananda to provide a commentary. His explanation is a fairly developed discourse on sevā, perhaps too developed for 1884, as it weaves together themes central to his more developed understanding of Vedānta.¹⁵ In it Vivekananda emphasizes the importance of synthesis, practical engagement with the world, proper knowledge of God and human persons, devotion, renunciation work, realization, and the necessary role service plays in all of this. In many ways it is one of the most concise presentations of his thinking. He states:

¹⁴ Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, 817-818.

¹⁵ Beckerlegge notes that this particular teaching is absent from Mahendranath Gupta's *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Although he does not comment on whether this passage could be a later interpolation by Saradananda, he does remark that this 'absence from the fullest record of Ramakrishna's utterances takes us into the heart of the controversy over the role of Vivekananda's role as mediator of Ramakrishna's message.' He adds, 'the fact that Ramakrishna's commendation of sevā has no place in Mahendranath Gupta's record does not constitute a particular source of difficulty within the Ramakrishna movement. Rather, Vivekananda's retention of this teaching, having recognized its full import, is regarded as a further example of his unique ability to intuit and unfold the hidden depths of Ramakrishna's teaching.' Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, 95.

In synthesizing the Vedantic knowledge, which was generally regarded as dry, austere and even cruel, with sweet devotion to the Lord, what a new mellowed means of experiencing the Truth has he revealed today! In order to attain the non-dual knowledge we have been told so long, one should have to renounce the world and the company of men altogether and retire to the forest and mercilessly uproot and throw away love, devotion and other soft and tender emotions from the heart. Formerly when the aspirant tried to attain that knowledge in the old way, he regarded the whole universe and each person in it as obstacles to the path of religion and contracting therefore a hatred for them, he more often than not went astray. But, from what the Master in ecstasy said today, it gathered that the Vedanta of the forest can be brought to human habitation and that it can be applied in practice to the work-a-day world. Let man do everything he is doing; there is no harm in that; it is sufficient for him, first to be fully convinced that it is God who exists, manifested before him as the universe and all beings in it. Those with whom he comes in contact every moment of his life, whom he loves, respects and honours, and to whom his sympathy and kindness flow, are all His parts, are all He Himself. If he cannot thus look upon persons of the world as Siva, how can there be an occasion for him to regard himself as superior to them or cherish anger and hatred for them or an arrogant attitude towards them, yes, or even kind to them? Thus serving the Jivas as Siva, he will have his heart purified and be convinced in a short time that he himself is also a part of God, the eternally pure, awake and free, and bliss Absolute.

We get a great light on the path devotion too from these words of the Master. Until he sees God in all beings, the aspirant has not the remotest chance or realizing true transcendental devotion. If the devout aspirant serves the Jivas as Shiva or Narayana, he, it is superfluous to say, will see God in all, attain true devotion and have the aim of his life fulfilled in a short time. Those aspirants who adopt the path of action or that of concentration for the realization of God, will also get much light from these words. For, as embodied beings can never rest for a moment without doing work, it goes without saying that it is only the work of the service of Jivas as Siva that it should be performed, and action done in that spirit will enable them to reach their goal sooner than otherwise. If the divine Lord ever grants me the opportunity, I'll proclaim everywhere in the world this wonderful truth I've heard today. I will preach this truth to the learned and the ignorant, to the rich and the poor, to the Brahmins and the Chandalas.¹⁶

This packed exposition—to be unpacked below—expands lengthily upon Ramakrishna's own limited statement regarding *jīva sevā*. Given his skeptical view of organized service, the degree to which these ideas are representative of Ramakrishna's

¹⁶ Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, 818. Other than just how remarkably developed this statement is for Vivekananda in 1884—it occurs ten years prior to his letter that contains a rough sketch of what service might entail—there is no further documentary evidence to suggest that this is an interpolation.

own conception of *sevā* is debatable. Vivekananda connects a lot of dots in his commentary which are present in Ramakrishna's teachings, but which he himself did not connect. There is one subtle shift that Vivekananda makes that will become central to his understanding of *sevā*'s fruits. In the conclusion of the first paragraph he states, 'thus serving the Jivas as Siva, he will have his heart purified and be convinced in a short time that he himself is also a part of God, the eternally pure, awake and free, and bliss Absolute,' and in the second he adds, 'action done in that spirit will enable them to reach their goal sooner than otherwise.' *Sevā* prepares one for and helps one achieve the liberating knowledge of non-dualism—identity as non-difference with Brahman. It is merely a result of spiritual realization, but a means to it as well.

Conversely, Ramakrishna presents *sevā* as the natural outflowing of one who possesses the 'conviction in one's heart that the whole universe belongs to Krishna.' His emphasis on *bhakti*, which for Vivekananda appears only in the second half of his commentary, fits contextually with the topic of conversation and with his view on the proper ordering of *jñāna* and *viññāna*. For Ramakrishna *nirvikalpa samādhi*—the realization of non-dual reality, the apprehension of Brahman—is the penultimate stage of knowing. The *jñāni* the one who possesses this knowledge of the impersonal Brahman returns from this experience realizing also that all is Brahman. Devdas states:

When the *viññāna* descends from *Samadhi* and "opens his eyes to the world," he has the continual awareness of Brahman as non-dual, changeless, indescribable; simultaneously, he accepts the universe and all *jīva s* as the joyous display of the dynamic aspect of Brahman...the two *mahāvākyas*: *Brahman is One-without-a-second* and *All this is verily Brahman* are held together in the mature experience of *viññāna*.¹⁷

¹⁷ Devdas, *Svami Vivekananda*, 24. See also Devdas, *Sri Ramakrishna*, 43f.

Having attained this two-fold awareness, one performs service knowing already the proper relationship between jīvas and God. Ramakrishna's language of *viññāna* fuses together concepts from the paths of knowledge and devotion. Right knowledge allows for mature, and so right, devotion. The correction—following an ecstatic experience—away from compassion and towards service situates Ramakrishna's idea of *sevā* thoroughly within a devotional framework.¹⁸ Just as one would perform *sevā* to God, one now performs *sevā* to jīvas aware of their true identity in relation to God, Brahman.

For Vivekananda, *sevā* is a means to right knowledge and not only a result of its attainment. It is an appropriate practice for any person treading down the spiritual paths of knowledge (*jñāna*), devotion (*bhakti*), action (*karma*), or concentration (*rāja*). Rather than reversing Ramakrishna's trajectory of *jñāna* to *viññāna*, Vivekananda begins from a position of *avidyā* or *ajñāna*—in which one has yet to realize liberating knowledge. The practice of *sevā* conditions the person, helping her to actualize realization. The dynamic movement present in Ramakrishna's teaching is not so much abandoned, as it is not yet arrived at. However, Vivekananda does switch the trajectory in light of his synthetic understanding of Vedānta, which culminates in *advaita*. For him, one most often proceeds from the content of *viññāna*—*saguṇa* Brahman (with qualities)—to attaining *jñāna*—*nirguṇa* Brahman (without qualities).¹⁹ This said, the practical side of his Vedānta follows more closely Ramakrishna's ordering in which *jñāna* leads to *viññāna* which in turn promotes service.

¹⁸ There is another shift that occurs after ecstatic experience. The conversation began with a discourse on the Vaiṣṇava tradition and with reference to Kṛṣṇa. The conversation concludes with a reference to Śiva, and all of this comes from the mouth of a Kālī devotee. Once again the fluidity of Ramakrishna's catholicity is on display.

¹⁹ 'Often' is used here in light of Vivekananda's view that most persons begin either with dualism or qualified non-dualism. 'Content' is used here to distinguish the epistemological difference between an awareness of and a realization of. Though it sounds tautological, one does not know until one knows.

Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Movement both appeal to Ramakrishna's examples and teachings as they worked to establish the practice of sevā. However, Vivekananda's sevā, especially its emphasis on organization, does differ from Ramakrishna's. For some like A. Bharati, N.R. Adams, and N. Sil the difference between the two is a bridge too far.²⁰ Similar to Hacker's critique that Vivekananda's Vedānta breaks from traditional Hinduism, they view his understanding of sevā to be a deviation from Ramakrishna's teaching. Beckerlegge notes that for 'critical observers,' 'organized sevā, or the *sādhana* of service, has come to be presented as a watershed between the priorities of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and thus between Vivekananda and authentic Hindu tradition.'²¹ However, rather than discontinuity, following Neevel it is best to view their relationship as continuity marked by innovation.²² Neevel states:

I believe that if we can view Ramakrishna in his own terms rather than those of Sankara's *advaita*, we can accept at face value Swami Vivekananda's claim that his social concern was inspired directly by his Master. For, although Sri Ramakrishna did not engage directly in social service, his teachings did provide a traditional Hindu basis for a dynamic and life-affirming world-view that Swami Vivekananda in turn developed into an ethical philosophy more adequate for Hindus living in a modern context.²³

²⁰ Sil's position on Ramakrishna's asocial tendencies has been noted above. Bharati argues that Vivekananda has, '[set] himself up in crass contradiction to his master.' A. Bharati, *The Ochre Robe* (Santa Barbara: Ross Erickson, 1980), 95. Adams states, 'perhaps Swami Vivekananda did not himself realize how much his life work took a direction different from that of Shri Ramakrishna.' N. R. Adams, 'Background of some Hindu Influences in America: The Ramakrishna Movement,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 9.1 (1972): 323.

²¹ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, 164.

²² However, even some of Ramakrishna's closest disciples like Swami Yogananda and Mahendranath Gupta viewed Vivekananda's innovations as a move away from their master's teaching. Swami Yogananda recounted, 'I confess that doubts sometimes arise in my mind, for as we saw it, his [Ramakrishna's] method of doing things was different, and I ask myself if we are not straying too far from the path chalked out by him. (HRMM, 98). Gupta, compiler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* was more adamant in his disagreement with the path Vivekananda had taken. He never joined the Ramakrishna Math, and at the blessing of the Ramakrishna Mission Home of Service (1912) was 'teased' by the President of the Mission for holding a view, 'supported by many others, that the idea of service sponsored by Swami Vivekananda did not quite accord with what Shri Ramakrishna had taught. (HRMM: 181). Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda's Legacy of Service*, 69.

²³ Neevel, 'The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna,' 56.

The inspiration, in spirit if not in letter, for Vivekananda's understanding of *sevā* was his master. Although Ramakrishna did not commission a *sāadhanā* of service, his teaching provided the motivation upon which Vivekananda would establish his organized community of service. But Vivekananda did build upon this foundation, and the time he spent as a *parivrajaka* wandering about India and his tour of the West would contribute to the development of his *sevā*. Whether ultimately the primary inspiration behind Vivekananda's *sevā* can be located in the master's example and teaching or in the disciple's travels and experiences is not evident. What is evident is that without either there would no *sevā*.

Following Ramakrishna's death, Vivekananda left Kolkata and traveled about India. He was still uncertain whether to seek out personal renunciation or to return and live in community with his brother disciples. Two experiences during this period especially shaped his development of *sevā*. The first was his awakening to the extreme plight of India's poor. The second was his likely encounter with alternative forms of *sevā* as practiced by the Swaminarayan Movement. Both challenged Vivekananda's initial reliance on a top-down approach to alleviating the sufferings of the masses.²⁴ Although he did not completely abandon a model that appealed to *raj-dharma* (kingly duty and

²⁴ In his *Reminiscences of Swami Vivekananda*, Haripada Mitra recounts how Vivekananda justified his close interactions with princes and rajas. He recalls Vivekananda saying, 'Just compare the results one can achieve by instructing thousands of poor people and inducing them to adopt a certain line of action on the one hand, and by converting a prince to that point of view on the other. Where will they get the means for accomplishing a good project even if the poor subjects have a will to do it? A prince has the power of doing good to his subjects already in his hands. Only he lacks the will to do it. If you can once wake up that will in him, then, along with it, the fortune of his subjects will take a turn for the better, and society will be immensely benefited thereby.' *Sevā* is a reversal of this original position and calls for a bottom-up approach. The date for this quotation is uncertain—Mitra simply identifies it as 'one day'—but the surrounding quotations are dated October 1892.

responsibility), he found it difficult to court sustained support from this group.²⁵

Moreover, he realized that tackling the problems that India faced would require a broader base. Rather than relying upon a few rajas, Vivekananda sought to enlist an entire nation. Material support for his endeavors could be attained in the West, but the spiritual regeneration of his fellow countrymen and women could only occur at home.

The previous chapter commented upon Vivekananda's eye-opening travel experiences. He witnessed staggering poverty, disease, and famine on a scale previously unknown to him even with his own difficulties brought on by his family's economic hardships. He also came to recognize the ways in which social practices like caste and privilege exacerbated poverty and degradation as well as Hinduism's—as it was lived and practiced—inability to offer a necessary corrective.²⁶ During this time away from Kolkata, he spent nearly twelve months in Gujarat, some of which included stays in Swaminarayan centers. The exact extent of the Swaminarayan movement's influence upon Vivekananda is difficult to assess. Vivekananda refers neither to the movement nor to its founder Sahajananda Swami (1781-1830) in either his talks or writings, but their teachings on *sevā* and the language they employed shows similarities that provide evidence for suggesting his familiarity with them. At the very least it demonstrates that the kind of *sevā* Vivekananda envisioned had precedent in India and was not merely the result of his exposure to the West.

²⁵ Vivekananda continued to enjoy support from rajas and princes. The Rajas of Khetri and Ramnad helped to fund his travels in the United States and he appealed to them directly and indirectly to continue to work to alleviate the sufferings of the masses. His community of benefactors in the West, mainly, but not limited to, society women, shows also his reliance on a top-down approach there as well.

²⁶ One of the primary reasons Vivekananda rejected the title 'reformer' was that he did not identify the social problems plaguing India to be the necessary result of Hinduism. Before in audience in Madras, he states, 'the truths of the Upanishads are before you. Take them up, live up to them, and the salvation of India will be at hand.' *CWSV* 3.225, 'My Plan of Campaign,' (Madras, 1897).

Working within a Viśiṣṭādvaita framework, Sahajananda advocated for his sannyasins to become engaged in social services such as the construction of wells and tanks, offering spiritual teaching without making demands on the villagers, and providing famine relief.²⁷ The theological and ethical foundation for their sevā can be seen in his statement, ‘Man is the microcosm of God who is the macrocosm and hence service to humanity is in service of the almighty God.’²⁸ The identification between service to humanity and service to God is reminiscent of both Ramakrishna’s and Vivekananda’s teaching.²⁹ Beckerlegge does posit one important difference between Sahajananda and Vivekananda’s sevā s. The former’s remained within a more traditional Hindu framework. Sevā operated at the local level and for the ‘welfare of the *satsang* [monastic community].’³⁰ The latter’s sought to bring service to the nation and, ultimately, the world. Nevertheless, both believed it to be the sannyasins’ special role to be the performer of this service.

The influence of the West upon Vivekananda is easier to surmise than the Swaminarayan Movement. Having secured an invitation to the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago, Vivekananda headed to the United States hoping also to raise funds for his envisioned community. An early report from *The Salem Evening News* outlines Vivekananda’s intentions in the US and for India. The paper reports:

²⁷ Beckerlegge, ‘Swami Vivekananda and Sevā,’ 188.

²⁸ H. H. Joshi, ‘Spiritual Humanism of Shri Swaminarayan,’ in *New Dimensions in Vedanta Philosophy: Bhagawan Swaminarayan Bicentenary Commemoration Volume* (Ahmedabad, 1981), 29. Quoted in Beckerlegge, ‘Swami Vivekananda and Sevā,’ 188.

²⁹ H. T. Dave provides another quotation attributed to Sahajananda Swami that echoes Ramakrishna. Sahajananda believed that, ‘an empty stomach would never relish problems of theology. So the necessities of life should be met first and then only could the spiritual needs be catered for.’ H. T. Dave, *Life and Philosophy of Shree Swaminarayan* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1970), 70. Ramakrishna was raised in Vaiṣṇava household, and as his early quotation reveals, he did incorporate Vaiṣṇava language alongside Saiva in his teaching on service. Vivekananda routinely shifted his vocabulary depending on his context.

Beckerlegge, ‘Swami Vivekananda and Sevā,’ 190.

It is with the hope of interesting the American people in this great need of the suffering, starving millions that he has come to this country...the speaker explained his mission in his country to organize monks for industrial purposes, that they might give the people the benefit of this industrial education and thus elevate them and improve their condition.³¹

In a letter drafted a week earlier and addressed to Alasinga Perumal, Vivekananda displayed dissatisfaction with India's wealthy elite.³² He writes:

Trust not to the so-called rich, they are more dead than live. The hope lies in you—in the meek, the lowly, but faithful...I have travelled twelve years with this load in my heart and this idea in my head. I have gone from door to door of the so-called rich and great. With a bleeding heart I have crossed half the world to this strange land, seeking for help.³³

He may have expected greater material help from the United States and the West, and while he did accumulate funds through lecturing, he benefitted primarily from a similar patronage system that he had established in India. Despite his frequent pleas for food and not religion, Vivekananda enjoyed only marginal success in garnering international support for his mission in India. However, he did not return empty handed.

The transition from traditional models of philanthropy—local and individual—to more modern forms—national and communal—requires explanation, and Beckerlegge does well in problematizing the simple equation of modernization with Westernization or Christianization. Be it in India or the United States and Great Britain, modern methods of philanthropy were that, a modern phenomenon emerging only in the early and mid-19th

³¹ *CWSV* 3:465-466, 'India: Her Religions and Customs,' *Salem Evening News*, 8.29.1893.'

³² Alasinga Perumal was an important figure in Vivekananda's life and the life of the Ramakrishna Community. A devout Vaiṣṇava from Madras, he first met Vivekananda in 1892 as V. was travelling as a wandering monk. Alongside being a close friend and disciple, Alasinga helped secure funds for Vivekananda to travel to the US, was the point person for activities in Madras, and was the founding editor of *The Brahmavadin*, a biweekly publication under his leadership. See Swami Sunirmalananda, *Alasinga Perumal: An Illustrious Disciple of Swami Vivekananda—A Saga of Commitment, Dedication, and Devotion to His Guru* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2012).

³³ *CWSV*: 5.16, 'Epistle IV,' (8.20.1893, Metcalf, MA). Vivekananda did not completely abandon appealing to the rich of India. A later letter to Alasinga states, 'see the Raja of Ramnad and others from time to time and urge them sympathise with the masses of India. Tell them how they are standing on the neck of the poor, and that they are not fit to be called men if they do not try to raise them up,' *CWSV* 5: 23, 'Epistle V,' (11.2.1893, Chicago).

century.³⁴ Advancements in communication and transportation allowed for information and goods to be shared more easily. They also revealed the degree to which social problems were not limited to one particular locality. The need for aid was great in a great many places. Beckerlegge notes, ‘the ever-increasing demand for support reinforced the view that earlier styles of philanthropic intervention could no longer cope with the extent of visible social need.’³⁵

One sees such a realization occurring in Vivekananda during his years as a *parivrajaka*. Poverty, disease, famine were not just Bengali problems, but more broadly Indian problems. Traditional methods of philanthropy might be able to alleviate the conditions somewhat at the local level. Eradicating these problems would require a new approach; one capable of addressing the surface issues as well as the structural problems.³⁶ In the West, Vivekananda found such a model, which he adapted upon his return to fit the Indian context.

Swami Tyagananda points to the idea of ‘organization’ as having the greatest impact upon Vivekananda during his time in the West. By organization he means the institutionalization, structuring, networking, and dissemination of social service on a

³⁴ Beckerlegge also demonstrates that traditional forms of charity in Hinduism and Christianity shared similar patterns. Most notably that in both, ‘the incidence, extent and duration of traditional charitable activity depended heavily upon the impulse of the individual donor and even upon the donor happening to be in the right place at the right time.’ Beckerlegge, ‘Swami Vivekananda and Seva,’ 182.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 176.

³⁶ In a letter to Alasinga, Vivekananda identifies some of structural problems that must be addressed. He writes, ‘Let each one of us pray day and night for the downtrodden millions in India who are held fast by poverty, priestcraft, tyranny—pray day and night for them...I see what they call the poor of this country, and how many there all who feel for them! What an immense difference in India! Who feels there for two hundred millions of men and women sunken forever in poverty and ignorance? Where is there way out? Who feels for them?...So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not heed to them! I call those men who strut about in their finery, having got all their money by grinding the poor, wretches, so long as they do not do anything for those two millions who are now no better than hungry savages! We are poor, my brothers, we are nobodies, but such have been always the instrument of the Most High.’ *CWSV* 5:58, ‘Epistle XXV,’ (1894, Chicago).

large scale.³⁷ Vivekananda found inspiration in the developing Social Gospel Movement, which provided him an example and grammar for organizing a popular response to the plight of the urban poor. Recognizing and responding to the varied dimensions of social plight, the Social Gospel Movement sought to develop a robust theology that could address the problems of urbanization and modernization and could encourage social action. ‘Practical Christianity,’ ‘practical religion,’ and ‘Dynamic Religion’ figure prominently in the movement’s self-understanding, as does a wider call for participation in philanthropic endeavors.³⁸ Vivekananda caught the movement at an exciting time as it was beginning to gain steam in the United States and had found common allies in the Christian Socialism movement maturing in England. It is not surprising that he would be energized and impacted by its message.

Despite keeping close company with various leaders in these movements, Vivekananda does not reference them directly in his works until much later. In a talk delivered in 1900, during his second visit to the US, he does, but now to distinguish clearly his form of Practical Religion from those of his contemporaries in the West. He states:

Every day we hear about practical Christianity—that man has done some good to fellow beings. Is that all?...The vast majority of people are dreaming of a time when there will be no more disease, sickness, poverty, or misery of any kind. They will have a good time all around. Practical religion, therefore, simply means: ‘Clean the streets! Make it nice!’....You must see God. The spirit must be

³⁷ Swami Tyagananda, Boston College Symposium on Interreligious Dialogue, September, 2011. Although he would have encountered organized service in the Christian missionaries’ activities in Bengal, Vivekananda gained a behind-the-scenes perspective while in the United States.

³⁸ M. L. Burke shows that in Baltimore, Vivekananda shared a stage with and was hosted by the Vrooman brothers who at the time were traveling the country promoting Dynamic Religion. There was even some talk of creating an international university that would bring together students from different religious backgrounds. M. L. Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, Vol. 2, *His Prophetic Mission*, (Calcutta: Advaita Ashram, 1994), 193, 205.

realized, and that is practical religion...Serve as worship of the Lord Himself in the poor, the miserable, the weak.³⁹

Although this lecture is delivered six years after his first encounter with groups like the Christian Social Gospel Movement, it demonstrates the degree to which he reflected upon these movements and how he understood his Practical Vedanta and sevā to be different from them then.

The letters to his brothers following his first in March 1894 and through 1895 show Vivekananda stressing more adamantly the need to organize. Though he hints of greater things in that first letter, ‘All these plans I cannot write out in this short letter,’ by late 1894 and early 1895 his project had developed significantly from the idea of ‘some disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others.’⁴⁰ A midsummer letter sent to the brother at the Alambazar monastery was to serve as a rallying cry to continue to push the movement forward. He writes:

I am giving you a new idea. If you can work it out, then I shall know you are men and will be of service...Make an organized plan...You have got lots of poor and ignorant folk there. Go to their cottages, from door to door, in the evening, at noon, any time—and open their eyes. Books, etc. won’t do—give them oral teaching. Then slowly extend your centres. Can you do all this? Or only bell-ringing?...Come! Apply yourselves heart and soul to it. The day of gossip and ceremonials is gone, my boy, *you must work now*...Let character be formed and then I shall be in your midst. Do you see? We want two thousand Sannyasins, nay ten, or even twenty thousand—men and women both...Let me see you make electric circuits between Calcutta and Madras. Start centers at places, go on always making converts...Arise! Arise! A tidal wave is coming! Onward! Men and women down to the Chandala—all are pure in his eyes. Onward! Onward! There is no time to care for name, or fame, or Mukti, or Bhakti! We shall look at these another time...PS The term organization means division of labour. Each does his own part, and all parts taken together express an ideal of harmony.⁴¹

³⁹ *CWSV* 4: 238, 246, ‘The Practice of Religion,’ (4.18.1900, Alameda, CA).

⁴⁰ *CWSV* 6: 265-6, ‘Epistle XLI,’ (3.19.1894).

⁴¹ *CWSV* 6: 289-95, ‘Epistle LVI,’ (Summer 1894).

Six-months later, Vivekananda wrote Alasinga distressed by the movement's lack of progress. He writes, 'What work have you done in the way of advancing the ideas and organizing in India? *None, none, none!*'⁴² Letters sent to his brother disciples throughout 1895 continue to call for their opening centers and to increase their efforts in organizing.⁴³

Both as a Brāhmo associate and as a disciple of Ramakrishna he had participated already in organizations as a collective of persons coming together. In the United States, he encountered organizations that possessed organization—structure and purpose: national and international networks, infrastructure, and most importantly a mission. The seeds for fashioning such a movement in India had been sowed prior to his departure; all he lacked was a model and method for its implementation. The Social Gospel movement possessed a practice and a complementing theory/theology, and with the development of Practical Vedanta Vivekananda would soon have both. Creating centers at the local level would allow for service to be performed so as to meet the needs of the immediate community. Establishing a robust theology and philosophy of service would allow the movement to flourish by gaining previously unmoved supporters. In uniting theory and practice, he most models the Social Gospel Movement.⁴⁴

⁴² *CWSV* 5: 67, 'Epistle XXX,' (1.12.1895, USA). A letter dated only 1894, also to Alasinga, shows Vivekananda's desire for results. He writes, 'Now, go to work!...To have a centre is a great thing; try to secure such a place in a large town like Madras, and go on radiating a living force in all directions...Take hear and work. Show me something you have done. Show me a temple, a press, a paper, a home for me. Where shall I come to if you cannot make a home for me in Madras? Electrify people. Raise funds and preach. Be true to your mission. Thus far you promise well, so go on and do better and better still.' *CWSV* 5: 61-62, 'Epistle XXVII,' (1894, USA).

⁴³ *CWSV* 6: 297, 'Epistle LVIII,' (1.17.1895, Sarada, New York); *CWSV* 6: 314, 'Epistle LXXI,' (1895, Rakhal); *CWSV* 6: 325, 'Epistle LXXIV,' (end of 1895, Rakhal, USA)

⁴⁴ For both encouragement and admonishment Vivekananda would often relate his successes in establishing centers in the West. As the Ramakrishna Mission gained a greater international scope, one cannot dismiss the influential model that Western Missionary societies also provided him.

Like with Practical Vedanta, we once again encounter an eclectic weaving together of disparate influences that shape the creation of an organized program of sevā. He incorporated and corrected aspects of the Bengali reform movements like the Brāhmo Samaj, received and re/presented Ramakrishna's teaching on sevā, witnessed the plight of his countrymen and women, and encountered and appropriated aspects of modern service programs then developing in the West. One cannot deny that the resulting final product is something new, but novelty does not necessitate deviation.⁴⁵

In answering his self-posed question, 'did the use of these possibilities by Vivekananda and others constitute a 'Westernization' of the Hindu tradition?', Beckerlegge replies that appropriating 'these new capabilities to address visible need and human suffering cannot be viewed as a measure of continuity with the world-view of those Hindus, including those of earlier generations, who lacked the ability to intervene in the face of human and natural calamities.'⁴⁶ Times had changed, and traditional models of philanthropic activity—both Hindu and Christian—could not effectively respond to suffering. Vivekananda recognized the need to adapt, and in doing so he began to modernize by organizing social service practices.

Finally, it is helpful to remember Vivekananda's own understanding of his project. In distinguishing himself from modern Indian reformers, he saw his undertaking as one of 'growth and construction,' not 'destruction.'⁴⁷ He acknowledges his rootedness in the tradition, but recognizes that some adaptation was needed. Outlining his plan of

⁴⁵ Often there is an operative presupposition when assessing the historical development of tradition that equates 'did not say' with 'cannot say.' Such view necessarily requires the addition of an extra-traditional source in order for the tradition to leap this gap. Modern and Western forms of service are extra-Hindu, but a reflective engagement with them can lead to their appropriation in way that remains faithful to the tradition—so long as that tradition is understood to be living and dynamic.

⁴⁶ Beckerlegge, 'Swami Vivekananda and Sevā,' 192.

⁴⁷ *CWSV* 3: 213, 'My Plan of Campaign,' (1897, Madras).

campaign, he states, ‘What is my plan? My plan is to follow the ideas of the great ancient Masters... They did marvelous work. We have to do marvelous work also. Circumstances have become a little different, and in consequence the lines of action have changed a little, and that is all.’⁴⁸ Although the degree of change may be slightly and rhetorically understated, he nevertheless presents his program to be innovatively continuous with the great masters that came before him. His is a modernizing Hinduism, and *jīva sevā* is modernizing practice.⁴⁹ The next section will explore the construction and shape of this practice.

Jīva Sevā: The Development of an Idea

It was noted earlier that the eclecticism and, even more so, the pragmatism of Vivekananda’s writing and speaking can lead to a perceived absence of systematic coherence that nearly approaches inconsistency in his thought. Shifts in focus and emphasis regularly occur as new themes are lifted up for new audiences. Just as an idea seems to rise to prominence in his thought, it recedes to the background as another moves to the foreground. The seemingly frenetic mutability of his thought appears all the more dramatic given the brevity of his life and career, and it is only tempered by his legacy—stabilized by the Ramakrishna Mission’s efforts to bring organization and coherence to it.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 220. Amongst the ‘great ancient Masers’ listed in this speech are: Ramanuja, Shankara, Nānak, Chaitanya, Kabir, and Dādu.

⁴⁹ I use modernizing rather than modern to denote the transitional quality of Vivekananda’s thinking and practice. Both Beckerlegge and Nicholson point to the problems associated in Hacker’s insistence that ‘modern Hinduism’ constitutes a break with ‘traditional Hinduism.’ Modernizing emphasizes the transition of tradition from pre-modern to modern rather than ‘traditional’ to ‘modern.’ Unsurprisingly, there are differences between pre-modern and modern Hinduism, but tradition shoots through both. The modern context is different from the pre-modern context, and a living faith tradition, if it is living, should and does adapt to the new context. Vivekananda’s project is similar to *aggiornamento*, the process of modernizing the Catholic Church experienced up to and through Vatican II. His constant appeal to ‘tradition’ and traditional figures stresses his self-understanding to be one who is engaged in a project that is at once old (traditional) and new (modern).

This legacy, the timelessness attached to a revered teacher's sayings, can obscure the fact that Vivekananda wrote and spoke within a tiny window. Eighteen years passed between Ramakrishna's death and his own at the age of thirty-nine. Only a decade spans between his leaving for the United States and his succumbing to a host of complications born from his diabetes. During this period, as his thought developed it did so in public before and for diverse audiences. The *Complete Works*, nearly complete, present the messy and just-sketched-out alongside the polished and refined. It is all there, including many of his private epistles. It is a body of work that displays a mind at work as much as it does a mind's work.

Although frequently freewheeling in association and appropriation, Vivekananda remained moored by his desire to alleviate the physical and spiritual sufferings of his fellow Indians. It is this desire that brought him back to the Ramakrishna community following an extended quest for personal liberation. It is what sent him to the United States, had him lecture from Colombo to Lahore, and all the while writing to his brothers exhorting them to become engaged *sannyasins*. Ultimately, it is the cipher that brings coherence and consistency to his work, the common, underlying concern upon which he constructs his thought. No doubt, Vivekananda adjusted the philosophical and theological justifications for his project pragmatically, rhetorically, and contextually, but he did so also dialectically and in relation to the problem of suffering. The why of his thinking remained constant. The how changed in light of his successes and failures in engendering positive responses from his audience.

Does it work? On the intellectual side of philosophy and theology, this question can be answered by identifying a thinker's consistency in relation to his or her internal

logic: does it work systematically? It also can be answered in relation to his or her tradition: does it work historically or traditionally? On the practical side, this question can be answered by the actions and practices it produces. Vivekananda favored the latter as the primary test, but as seen in his lectures and in the articulation of Practical Vedanta he did not abandon the form entirely. Practical Vedanta can be viewed as Vivekananda's attempt to make Vedānta work practically and intellectually in which practice informs the theory and theory informs the practice.⁵⁰ The underlining practice that informs and is informed by theory is service.

Vivekananda's commendation of service is arguably the most the consistent aspect of his teaching. During the various stages of his career, and especially in the Indian context, the practice of service is lifted up as the ideal undertaking for those seeking God realization and societal transformation.⁵¹ As noted, Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Movement trace the program of *jīva sevā* to Ramakrishna's 1884 saying, 'not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva.' Vivekananda's explanation of its import points to the ways in which the practice leads to God-realization and how it relates to various spiritual paths. He comments, 'thus serving the Jivas as Siva, he will have his heart purified and be convinced in a short time that he himself is also a part of God, the eternally pure, awake and free, and bliss Absolute.'⁵² Comparing this first statement on

⁵⁰ The synthetic side of his Vedānta could then be understood as an effort to bring an overarching intellectual consistency to the various schools of Vedānta.

⁵¹ By the Indian context, I mean not only the physical space that the subcontinent occupies, but also the mental place it occupies in Vivekananda's mind. That is the Indian context includes both his presence there and his thinking about it, i.e. letter writing in the West and sent to his brothers in India.

One can see here parallels with Christianity, especially the social-spiritual teachings surrounding Matthew 25: 31-46 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?'

⁵² This first comment identifies the contribution of *jīva sevā* for an individual on the path of knowledge. For those on the path of devotion he states, 'If the devout aspirant serves the Jivas as Shiva or Narayana, he, it is superfluous to say, will see God in all, attain true devotion and have the aim of his life

service with one from the last months of his life, one can see the central place it held in his thinking. At the Belur Math in 1902, he states, ‘after so much austerity, I have understood this as the real truth—God is present in every Jiva; there is no other God besides that. Who serves Jiva, serves God indeed... What I have told you today, inscribe in your heart. See that you do not forget it.’⁵³ Aware of his diminishing health and reflecting upon his life, Vivekananda imparts this teaching as ‘the real truth.’ Though he died before the practice could be implemented on the broad scale he envisioned, the Ramakrishna Movement did inscribe the teaching in its heart as witnessed in their mission and practice.

Although he consistently appealed to the practice of service, the concept did develop over the course of his teaching with respects to theory. That said, the language used to present service, even after the incorporation of advaitic thinking through Practical Vedanta, remains thoroughly indebted to that of bhakti devotionism, and especially to that of the Bengali Gaudīya Vaiṣṇavism of Krishna Chaitanya (1476-1533) and his

fulfilled in a short time.’ For those undertaking the path of action he adds, ‘For, as embodied beings can never rest for a moment without doing work, it goes without saying that it is only the work of the service of Jivas as Siva that it should be performed, and action done in that spirit will enable them to reach their goal sooner than otherwise.’ Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, 818.

⁵³ *CWSV* 7: 247, ‘Conversations and Dialogues XXIV,’ (Belur Math, 1902). This passage captures also the two anthropological positions that supported sevā at different times. The first, ‘God is present in every Jiva,’ presents a more ‘theomonistic’ or ‘panentheistic’ understanding of the divine presence within the person. The second, ‘there is no other God than that,’ presents a more advaitic-based monism of direct identity between Jiva and the divine.

A second account demonstrates Vivekananda’s humor and humanity. Prompted by a disciple informing him that certain ‘outside people say a good deal against the sort of bedding and furniture’ at the Math, Vivekananda responds, ‘Let them say. Even in jest they will at once think of this Math. And they say, it is easier to attain liberation through cherishing a hostile spirit. Shri Ramakrishna used to say, “Men should be ignored like worms.” Do you mean we have to conduct ourselves according to the chance opinion of others? Pshaw!’

Evidently this disciple had been present at the earlier talk and had indeed inscribed Vivekananda’s teaching upon his heart. He replies back, ‘Sir, you sometimes say, “All are Narayanas, the poor and the needy are my Narayanas,” and again you say, “Men should be ignored like worms.” What do you really mean?’ Vivekananda answers, ‘Well, there is no doubt that all are Narayanas. But all Narayanas do not criticize the furniture of the Math. I shall go on working for the good of men, without caring in the least for criticism of others—it is in this sense that the expression, “Men are to be ignored like worms,” has been used.’ *CWSV* 7.250, ‘Conversations and Dialogues XXV,’ (Belur Math, 1902).

disciples. Vivekananda references Chaitanya frequently in his work.⁵⁴ Alongside a kind of regional pride, he acknowledges him to be ‘one of the greatest teachers of Bhakti the world has ever known...[whose] Bhakti rolled over the whole land of Bengal, bringing solace to everyone.’⁵⁵ Even when disagreeing with him, Vivekananda valued his spiritual and social contributions to India. He also appears to have been familiar with Rupa Goswami, one of Chaitanya’s first six disciples, and his work *Bhaktirasamṛtasindhu*—a treatise on the aesthetics of devotion. His lectures in the United States on *bhakti* draw upon Rupa Goswami’s theory of *bhāva* (emotional condition/disposition) and devotion.⁵⁶ As Vivekananda’s language of service begins to emphasize ‘service as worship’ (*sevā*), he both incorporates the teachings of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and draws a distinction between their understanding and his.

Vivekananda does not directly reference either Bhaktivinoda Thakur (1838-1914) or his son Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati Thakur (1874-1937), but he would have been familiar with the two Bengali Gauḍīya reformers who paved the way for the development of ISKCON. Not only were they contemporaries, they were of the same *Kayastha* jāti (prior to his initiation Bhaktivinoda Thakur’s name was Kendarnath Datta), members of the Bengali *bhadralok*, and had been part of the same intellectual circles—if somewhat tangentially. Bhaktivinoda had been classmates with Keshub Chunder Sen at the Hindu

⁵⁴ While staying with Pavhari Baba in Ghazipur, Vivekananda wrote to Balaram Bose, a disciple of Ramakrishna from a Bengali Vaiṣṇava family. In the letter he requests for Bose to send to Pavhari—who expressed a ‘tremendous love for Mahāprabhu Chaitanya’—a copy of the Chaitanya-Bhāgavata and Chaitanya-Mangala. His next letter to Bose confirms receipt of the books. *CWSV* 9:1, ‘Balaram Bose, 2.6.1890.’

⁵⁵ *CWSV* 3:266, ‘The Sages of India,’ (India, 1897). Vivekananda here lifts up Caitanya’s social inclusiveness, stating, ‘His love knew no bounds. The saint or the sinner, the Hindu or the Mohammeden, the pure or the impure, the prostitute, the streetwalker—all had a share in his love, all had a share in his mercy; and even to the present day, although greatly degenerated, as everything does with time, his sect is the refuge of the poor, the downtrodden, of the outcast, of the weak, of those who have been rejected by all society.’

⁵⁶ See *CWSV* 3: 93-100, ‘Human Representations of the Divine Ideal of Love,’ (2.1896, New York).

school in Calcutta and was at one time loosely associated with the Brāhmo Samaj—he eventually became quite critical of their ‘shallow theology.’⁵⁷ Inspired by Chaitanya’s biography *Sri-Caitanya-caritamṛta* and a Bengali translation of the *Bhagavata Purana*, Bhaktivinoda committed himself to the revival, reform, and popularizing of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. He established a press to print major Vaiṣṇava texts, his journal *Sajjana Toṣaṇi*, and several works he authored including *Jaiva Dharma* (1896) and his many devotional songs. The closing verse of his song *Nadiya Godrume* (1893) highlights the two practices central to Bhaktivinoda’s understanding: *jīve doyā* (compassion/mercy to all souls) and *Kṛṣṇanām* ([reciting] Kṛṣṇa’s name).⁵⁸ In establishing the practice of *jīva sevā*, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda make reference to the idea of *jīve doyā* and offer *sevā* as its corrective.⁵⁹

Bhakti devotionalism and Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, in its earlier and later forms, were important influences in shaping Vivekananda’s understanding of service. At the beginning, the practice appears to be quite similar to the idea of offering service as compassion rather than worship. Advaita’s later incorporation into the formula opens up the possibility to transition from offering compassion to offering worship. For the Bengali bhaktas, the distinction between service as compassion (*dayā*) and worship

⁵⁷ Jan Brzezinski notes that Bhaktivinoda had been a member of the Brāhmo Samaj. Jan Brzezinski, ‘Charismatic Renewal and Institutionalization in the Gauḍīya Vaishnavism and the Gauḍīya Math,’ in *The Hare Krishna Movement: The Postcharismatic Fate of a Religious Transplant*, eds. Edwin Bryant and Maria Ekstrand (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 83. In his autobiography, Bhaktivinoda states that while he had some association with the group, he never joined: ‘At that time the Brāhmos invited me to come to their assembly and I wrote to them saying that I was not a Brāhmo, but was a servant of the many followers of Caitanya. When the Brāhmos heard this they gave up hope of my [becoming a Brāhmo].’ Quoted in Kṛṣṇa Ksetra Dasa, ‘Reform in Tradition: Bhaktivinoda’s Apologetic for the Bhagavata Purana,’ in *ISKCON Communications Journal* 7.1 (1999).

⁵⁸ *Gitavali* 4.4.1. ‘*jīve doyā, kṛṣṇa-nām—sarva-dharma-sār*’

⁵⁹ The relationship between the followers of Ramakrishna and ISKON is not the most harmonious. No doubt their close proximity in Bengal as two major reforming/reviving movements alongside their overlapping endeavors in the West have contributed to this antagonism.

(sevā) is established in the qualitative difference between the objects receiving service.⁶⁰

Advaita Vedānta allows for this distinction to be abolished at the ultimate level of truth through the identification of atman with Brahman or in Vivekananda's language jīvas with God. The bhakti framework remains—it is service as worship that is being offered—but the object has now become much more inclusive.

One of Vivekananda's earliest references to service, excepting for now his 1884 commentary on jīva sevā, is found in an 1889 letter to Pramadadas Mitra. The letter comes during his *parivrajaka* phase in which he found time also to author an abridged Bengali translation of Thomas á Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. Accompanying the letter was a copy of this text, which he introduces to Mitra by noting that it is a 'wonderful book' authored by 'Christian Sannyasin' who demonstrates 'such renunciation and Dāśya-Bhakti.'⁶¹ Though he does not offer a definition here, in a subsequent lecture he defines this mode of bhakti as 'servantship, it comes when man thinks he is the servant of the Lord. The attachment of the faithful servant is the ideal.'⁶² In both instances, there is no direct connection between *dāśya* and social service, but it may very well inform his view on what the practitioner's proper disposition ought to be when he or she performs

⁶⁰ We will see that the language of sevā extends to one's guru and one's devotional community.

⁶¹ *CWSV* 6:209, 'Epistle 8, Pramadadas Mitra, Calcutta, 8.7.1889.' In the preface to his Bengali translation of the *Imitation of Christ*, he writes, 'The spirit of humility, the panting of the distressed soul, the best expression of Dāśya Bhakti (devotion as a servant) will be found imprinted on every line of this great book and the reader's heart will be profoundly stirred by the author's thoughts of burning renunciation, marvelous surrender, and deep sense of dependence on the will of God.' Alongside the spiritual truths manifest in the text, he offers the work as a corrective to the Indian perception of Christians in India—an image sullied by their own presentation.

⁶² *CWSV* 3: 94, 'Human Representations of the Divine Ideal of Love.' It is in this lecture that Vivekananda references without citation the five devotional *rasas* (flavors) of Rupa Gosvami. These are: *śānta* (peaceful, tranquil), *dāśya* (servitude), *sakhya* (friendship), *vātsalya* (parental), and *mādhurya* (sweet, conjugal). See also *CWSV* 6:112, 'Notes Taken down in Madras 1892-93.' Rupa Gosvami classifies devotees within these categories and provides exemplars of each from the tradition.

service as his 1901 appeal to Hanuman might suggest.⁶³ Overall it does not figure prominently, that is as an independent and distinguishable concept, in Vivekananda's developed understanding of *sevā*. However, 'service's' polyvalence allows for it to draw from a wide range of 'services,' which allows his audience to supplement his definition with their own understanding.

As for the missing link between devotional and social service in the letter to Pramadadas, one should note that he penned it three years before his transformative experience at Cape Comorin. The connection between the two may not have been forged yet, which would problematize the significance of Ramakrishna's 1884 comment and Vivekananda's subsequent explanation of it. It may very well be that the context of the letter and the example of Thomas á Kempis did not warrant such a move.⁶⁴ The final letter Vivekananda sent to him in 1897 makes this link apparent. He writes, 'another truth I have realized is that altruistic service only is religion, the rest, such as ceremonial observances, are madness—even it is wrong to hanker after one's own salvation.'⁶⁵ By this point his teaching on *sevā* had become quite robust.

The major shaping of service occurred between 1893 and the end of 1894 as Vivekananda travelled in the United States to raise funds for a then undefined project of

⁶³ Later he will offer Hanuman, the ideal *dāsaya bhakta*, who exemplifies unwavering devotion and courage, as an ideal for his younger disciples to follow. He states, 'you now have to build your life on this great ideal of personal service...As on one hand Hanuman represents the ideal of service, so on the other hand he represents leonine courage, striking the whole world with awe...such whole hearted devotion is wanted.' *CWSV* 7:232, 'Conversations and Dialogues XXI,' (Belur Math, 1901). Vivekananda also uses the language of servanthship when he writes to Ramakrishnananda in early 1894. Here he notes that a good leader should be a '*dāsya dāsa*—servant of servants.' *CWSV* 6:284, 'Epistle LIV,' (Ramakrishnananda, Chicago, early 1894).

⁶⁴ Given the paucity of primary sources we have from this phase of his life, it is difficult to gauge to what degree Vivekananda has paired already these two modes of service. The examples to follow suggest that the pairing is not yet central to his thinking. Again this would challenge the significance, if not also the veracity (as it is presented in *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*), of the 1884 incident. The context and example of this letter prevents such judgment, but the next earliest examples do open up the question.

⁶⁵ *CWSV* 6: 395, 'Epistle CXXIV,' (Almora, 5.30.1897).

social uplift. In his letters and talks from 1893 one sees several recurrent themes that outline the trajectory service will take. First, he identifies the particular plight of the Indian masses. Poverty, hunger to the point of starvation, and ignorance due to the lack of spiritual and secular education are the most frequently cited conditions of their suffering. Along with a qualitative description of their experiences, he supplies also a quantitative assessment of the vastness of this problem. The masses here total in the millions, and in one letter, he supplies the number ‘three hundred million’ to those ‘who are going down and down every day.’⁶⁶ Second, he calls for the need of organization. Given the depth and breadth of the problem, it cannot be assuaged by a small number of persons responding to it. The rich and powerful rajas, the people of Madras, a hundred thousand men and women, and the people of the United States are all rallied to support the cause.

Third, having identified the problem and those in a position to remedy it, Vivekananda begins to outline a response. Relief should be offered in the form of bread and education—spiritual and secular. However, as the program of service remains nascent, the organization of persons has yet to be embodied in any institutional form. Fourth and finally, Vivekananda points to the social systems and practices that are in place that perpetuate the masses’ suffering. Here, as elsewhere, failure occurs not at the religious level but at the social. Greed, privilege, and power corrupt the individual and these corruptions over time have affected and become embedded in society. The religious and economic elite in India—Brahmins and princes—maintain their authority by means of social practices and institutions like caste (again in its social and not religious form). They do not practice charity and express/experience sympathy, and in his early grammar of social reform it is to these virtues that Vivekananda appeals.

⁶⁶ *CWSV* 5: 17, ‘Epistle IV,’ (Alasinga; Metcalf, MA; 8.20.1893).

The following year (1894) saw Vivekananda's view on service become even more established. Given the limited source material available and due to its novelty, the shift in language from service understood as sympathy and compassion to service understood as worship appears quite dramatic. Although his then still-developing idea for the organized and systematized delivery of service differed from existing Hindu philanthropic activities, notions like showing sympathy and compassion towards all beings were common practices in Hindu devotional traditions. In the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition *jīve daya* (compassion/mercy to living beings) is presented alongside *vaishnave sevā* (service to Vaishnavas) and *nama ruci* (tasting/relishing the Holy Name) as encapsulating Chaitanya's teaching.⁶⁷ Vivekananda was aware of his tripartite teaching as Ramakrishna had taught it to his disciples, and his teaching in 1893 would not have been out of place within this framework.⁶⁸

Sometime between November 1893 and March 1894, Vivekananda had begun to switch from using sympathy and compassion for the poor to an idea of service as worship

⁶⁷ This summation comes from an amusing hagiographical anecdote involving Rupa Gosvami, Jiva Gosvami, and Sanatan Gosvami. One day a traveling travelling debater arrived in Vrindavan, where the disciples had gone on the orders of Chaitanya, seeking an admission of defeat from various local pandits. Given the stress that Chaitanya had placed upon humility, Rupa and Sanatan had no difficulty agreeing to admit their defeat. However, the younger Jiva would not submit and thoroughly thrashed the visitor in a debate. This upset Rupa, who saw his nephew's action to be sign that he was not ready to be a true sannyasin, and he called for him to leave his sights. Later on, Sanatan comes to Rupa and asks after Jiva. Unhappy with the news, Sanatan asks Rupa what Chaitanya understood their religion to be. Rupa replies that it is show compassion to jīvas and to have love for the Holy Name. To which Sanatan asks, 'then why have you not shown compassion to Jiva?' A reconciliation between the two quickly ensued. *Premavilasa*, 23.

⁶⁸ *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 36. Ramakrishna states, 'For you, as Chaitanya said, the disciplines to be practiced are kindness to living beings, service to the devotees, and chanting the name of God.' (2.22.1885)—after the 1884 statement. See also *CWSV* 5: 133, "Epistle LXXVII," (Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, Almora, 7.3.1897)

Although Vivekananda emphasizes service's social side—providing bread and secular education—he does not abandon the spiritual side. Receiving social aid allows one to receive spiritual aid. Sympathy and compassion in social matters have relevance for spiritual ones. For Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, showing compassion to jīvas meant instructing them in the spiritual matters. Chief amongst these was revealing the efficacy of chanting the Holy Name.

directed towards them.⁶⁹ With the letters sent to various disciples in early March one can see the gradual transformation in his anthropology and his understanding of service. To Kidi, he writes, ‘We believe that it is the duty of every *soul* to treat, think of, and behave to other *souls* as such, i.e. as *Gods*, and not hate or despise, or vilify, or try to injure them by any manner or means. This is the duty not only of the Sannyasin, but all men and women.’⁷⁰ Two weeks later he wrote to Ramakrishnananda relating his experience at Cape Comorin and making known his desire to form a band of sanyassins prepared ‘to give back to the nation its lost individuality and *raise the masses*.’⁷¹ The most marked shift in language arrives in a letter sent to Akhandananda sometime in late spring. He writes:

You have read—‘*māṭṛdevo bhava, pitṛdevo bhava*—look upon your mother as God, look upon your father as God”—but I say ‘*daridradevo bhava, mūrkhadevo bhava*—the poor, the illiterate, the ignorant, the afflicted—let these be your God.” Know that service to these alone is the highest religion.’⁷²

⁶⁹ Though we will see that this shift is by no means complete, even by the end of 1894.

⁷⁰ *CWSV* 4:356, ‘What We Believe In,’ (Kidi; Chicago, 3.3.1894).

⁷¹ *CWSV* 6:254-255, ‘Epistle XLI,’ (Ramakrishnananda; Chicago, 3.19.1894).

⁷² *CWSV* 6: 288, ‘Epistle LV,’ (Akhandananda, 3/4.1894). The letter’s precise date is unknown, and Beckerlegge argues for a later dating towards the end of May. In his chapter ‘Swami Akhandananda’s *Sevāvrata*,’ Beckerlegge shows how another of Ramakrishna’s disciples came to a similar, though not exact, understanding of *sevā*. Vivekananda’s letter to Akhandananda is the reply to the latter’s request to become engaged in social service programs. A. and V. had traveled together through Gujarat and had stayed at Swaminarayan centers. A.’s relationship with the Ayurvedic healer and philanthropist Jhandu Bhat influenced his decision to make a vow of service. Bhat constantly recited a verse of Rantideva, a figure renown for his generosity, ‘I do not desire for kingdom, heaven or even liberation. My one desire is to relieve the suffering of the distressed.’ V. had also met Bhat and remarked, ‘nowhere have I seen a generous man like Jhandu Bhat Viththalji.’ When A. shared this verse with V., he recalled how it brought tears to V.’s eyes.

Having sent the letter, A. was unsure as to how V. would reply. Recounting his anxiousness several years later he shared with Swami Niramayananda the following, ‘I began to count the days in expectation of a reply, and thought of many things that Swamiji might write. If he were to write: “you are a Sannyasin. Why bother your head with mundane problems? Remain satisfied with your scriptures, spiritual practices and travels,” I would have left India, crossed the Himalaya...from which I had been called back by Swamiji himself.’ Upon receiving V.’s reply, he was not certain how to interpret the message. Again he recounts, ‘I would always ask myself whether he had chosen me alone for this task. How was it that my other Gurubhais enjoyed the bliss of meditation and worship, while I alone should go about with the burden of other people’s misery on my head? What a joy it would be if he set all of us to this task! Sometime before I left Udaipur, I got a postcard written by Swami Ramakrishnananda from our Math. He informed me all of my Gurubhais had been urged by Swamiji to engage themselves in service.’ Gwilym Beckerlegge, ‘Swami Akhandananda’s *Sevāvrata* (Vow of Service) and the Earliest Expression of Service

In this final quotation, Vivekananda cites the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1.1.11.2 which states, ‘Treat your mother like a god. Treat your father like a God. Treat your teacher like a god. Treat your guests like a God.’⁷³ The teacher has given this instruction to a student who has just completed his Vedic studies. Its purpose is to prepare the student for advancing to the next stage of his life as a householder by reminding him that even though his studies are complete he still has certain responsibilities and duties that must be fulfilled.⁷⁴ The Upaniṣad progresses from more intimate relationships (mother and father) to less intimate relationships (teacher and finally guests), but there is still a relatively high level of intimacy as well as proximity presupposed in all four. The Upaniṣad also uses analogy rather than identity to exhort the student to properly honor these persons. These persons are to be viewed like a god, but they are not God.

Vivekananda’s formula ‘you have read...but I say,’ very reminiscent of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, highlights that what follows is a new interpretation of this passage. Along with these closer intimates, one is to include now also the poor, the ignorant, the illiterate, and the afflicted. These are persons one may not usually be mindful of, let alone prepared to honor, serve, and worship. His teaching does not refute or correct the Upaniṣad. Mothers, fathers, teachers, guests should all still be viewed as gods and treated

to Humanity in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission,’ in *Gurus and Their Followers: New Religious Reform Movements in Colonial India*, ed. Antony Copely, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65-70.

Beckerlegge argues that both V. and A. arrived at their ideas of service independently from one another. He states, ‘In fact, giving full weight to the part played by Akhandananda does not detract from Vivekananda’s role as coordinator of these early initiatives. It does, however, reflect more faithfully the complex interplay of influences that fed into what would become the movement’s characteristic sadhana or spiritual discipline of service to others.’ Ibid., 77.

⁷³ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 1.1.11.2 in Patrick Olivelle, *Upaniṣads*, 183. In his commentary on this passage, Swami Sharvananda from the Ramakrishna Math states, ‘Let thy mother be, etc. i.e.—let you look upon your father, mother, teacher and guests as veritable gods and worship them with due reverence and proper service.’ Swami Sharvananda, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1921), 43.

⁷⁴ This section of the *Upaniṣad* intends to inject some humility in the student who may be a bit puffed up due to his successful completion of studies. It also helps ensure that the student will not skip the householder stage in order to become a renunciant.

accordingly. Instead, he extends the principle present in the teaching beyond its initial scope. All persons are to be treated as gods. By doing this, he further concretizes the ethical sketch provided in his letter to Kidi. There it had been a charge for ‘souls’ to see other ‘souls’ as ‘Gods’; here these souls have become embodied persons who are to be served.

The letter to Akhandananda is significant for two reasons. First, Vivekananda introduces here, for the first time, the idea of offering devotional service (*seba*, *sevā*) to the masses. The sympathy and compassion he had earlier commended is amplified now to honor and devotion. Moreover, he calls service to the poor ‘*paradharma*,’ ‘the highest religion.’ It is religion’s true and proper end. Second, the penultimate clause in the letter to Akhandananda, ‘let these be your God,’ demonstrates Vivekananda beginning a transition in his anthropology from analogical recognition—viewing persons like gods or as if they were gods—to an idea that approximates the advaitic identification by equation found in his 1897 letter in which he states ‘Jiva and Isvara are in essence the same...for us, Advaitists, this notion of Jiva as distinct from God is the cause of bondage.’⁷⁵ However, it is only the beginning of this move, and his language remains somewhat ambiguous given the Upaniṣadic source material, which uses analogy, and the frequent back and forth between ideas that occurs in his later letters.

Following his letter to Akhandananda, Vivekananda sent one to his brother disciples at the Math in Alambazar encouraging all of them to undertake this new kind service. He writes, ‘whoever will be ready to serve him [Great Lord, *Hare*]—no, not him but his children—the poor, the downtrodden, the sinful and the afflicted, down to the

⁷⁵ *CWSV* 5: 133 “Epistle LXXVII,” (Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, Almora, 7.3.1897). In the letter to Akhandananda, Vivekananda uses the Bengali *debata* for God.

very worm—who will be ready to serve these, in these he will manifest himself.’⁷⁶ In moment of reflective correction or rhetorical subversion, he initially creates a distinction between the Great Lord and his children as to whom service should be offered. This distinction draws attention to the newness of the idea by providing a momentary pause before he ultimately and quickly collapses it through the belief that the Great Lord will make himself manifest in these persons—the same list from the Akhandananda letter. Recognition by analogy has now become identification by manifestation, but it is not yet identification by equation.

The most emphatic statement on service and identity occurs in a letter dated only 1894.⁷⁷ Here he equates service with worship (*puja*) while offering a scathing critique of the waste and excess present in elaborate ceremonial forms of worship. Juxtaposing real worship offered to the ‘Living God’ (*bhagaban*), the ‘Man-God’ (*nara-narayana*), and ‘God in his universal (*birāta*) as well as individual aspect’ with other devotional practices, he writes:

The universal aspect of God means this world, and worshipping it means serving it — this indeed is work, not indulging in ceremonials. Neither is it work to cogitate as to whether the rice-plate should be placed in front of the God for ten minutes or for half an hour — that is called lunacy. Millions of rupees have been spent only that the temple doors at Varanasi or Vrindaban may play at opening and shutting all day long! Now the Lord is having His toilet, now He is taking His meals, now He is busy on something else we know not what. ... And all this, while the Living God is dying for want of food, for want of education!⁷⁸

⁷⁶ *CWSV* 6: 295, ‘Epistle LVI,’ (Brother disciples at Alambazar, Summer 1894). The editors of the *Complete Works* place identify the date as ‘Summer?’. In the Bengali letter, *Hare* is the word used for ‘Great Lord.’

⁷⁷ *CWSV* 6: 264, “Epistle XLV,” (Brothers, 1894). The postscript references the March 3rd letter as ‘previous,’ in which he reminded his brothers that both men and women should undertake this project.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* At times Vivekananda does express an iconoclasm that shares the Brāhmo sentiment that the ceremonial practices are rooted in superstition. Other times he views these simply as lower, but for many people, necessary modes of worship. Here his iconoclasm has an Amos-like quality about it—given the degree of human suffering, worship and the resources directed to it, should be offered to living Gods, humans. Only this kind of worship is the highest. Vivekananda aware of the novelty of this program, ‘a thing that was never undertaken before in our country,’ recognizes that not all persons will be willing to

Vivekananda offers a similar critique of ceremony in a letter written in October. He writes, ‘Do you love you fellow men? Where should you go to seek for God—are not all the poor, the miserable, the weak, Gods? Why not worship them first? Why go to dig a well on the shores of the Gangā?’⁷⁹ Both letters rework *sevā*’s meaning. The devotional aspect remains, but the object of worship has changed or, more appropriately, who God is understood to be has changed. Both these letters appear more in line with Vivekananda’s later statement on *jīva sevā* in 1897 in which his anthropology has become thoroughly advaitic.⁸⁰

It would appear that with the exception of incorporating a more advaitic anthropology Vivekananda’s transformation of *sevā* is complete by the last months of 1894. However, running parallel to these transitional letters are others that return to the original language of sympathy, compassion, and analogical recognition. Moreover, these come at the very end of 1894. Vivekananda’s letter from mid-November reads like double-step-back from those earlier ones. First, sympathy and compassion return in the place of service. Second, the disciples are told to direct the suffering brought on by sympathy to the Lord’s feet. While he is not advocating for a return to ceremonials, this act follows more closely models of devotional service—*pādasevana* (serving at the Lord’s feet) and finding refuge at the Lord’s feet—than it does *jīva sevā*.⁸¹ His final letter

jump on board. Thus he concludes this section of letter writing, ‘No quarrelling with people, we must be friends with all.’

⁷⁹ *CWSV* 5: 51, ‘Epistle XXI,’ (Alasinga, Washington, 10.27.1894)

⁸⁰ The October letter also emphasizes the importance of love, but Vivekananda does not yet distinguish love and compassion as he will in 1897.

⁸¹ Vivekananda writes, ‘Feel, my children, feel; feel for the poor, the ignorant, the downtrodden; feel till the heart stops and the brain reels and you think you will go mad—then pour the soul out at the feet of the Lord, and then will come power, help, and indomitable energy.’ *CWSV* 4: 367 ‘To My Brave Boys,’ (Alasinga, New York, 11.19.1894). This passage is reminiscent of his letter to Alasinga in August 1893. There he tells Alasinga to go at once to the temple of Pārthasārthi (Krishna as the charioteer), bow before

from 1894, given the date ‘Winter, 1894?’ by the editors, echoes the one from November. Again it is sympathy and not service, recognition by analogy and not identification by manifestation or equation.⁸²

The development of Vivekananda’s teaching on sevā over the course of 1894 presents two important questions. The first is, ‘why then?’ What was it about the early and mid months of 1894 that allowed Vivekananda to make this new statement on service? Second, having presented this new teaching, why does he suddenly return to the language of sympathy and compassion? Regarding the first, Beckerlegge argues that by the summer of 1894 Vivekananda had come to a resolution, overcoming either ‘an uncertainty or even internal conflict over his strategy of for seva.’⁸³ Between 1892 (Cape Comorin) and March 1894 a plan of service gradually had been taking shape. Although he does begin to offer a theological justification for the practice in his identification-by-manifestation anthropology, much of his introduction to this new approach is reserved to identifying the problem and problematic persons, supplying ‘practical instruction’ in how service should be delivered, and differentiating this form of sevā from ceremonial devotion.⁸⁴ Travelling through the United States provided Vivekananda with some much needed time for reflection as well as some much needed distance from the Indian context. He had freedom to think and freedom to think freely on the topic.⁸⁵ The theoretical

him, and offer as sacrifice Alasinga’s life working for the masses. See *CWSV* 5: 17 ‘Epistle IV,’ (Alasinga; Metcalf, MA, 8.20.1893).

⁸² Vivekananda writes, “‘who feels for the two hundred millions of men and women sunken forever in poverty and ignorance? Where is the way out? Who feels for them? They cannot find light or education—who will travel from door to door to bring education to them? Let these people be your God—think of them, work for them, pray for them incessantly—the Lord will show you the way.’ *CWSV* 5: 58, ‘Epistle XXV,’ (Alasinga, Chicago, Winter 1894).

⁸³ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 194.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁵ It is only in the fall that Vivekananda spent significant time with Vrooman brothers in Baltimore where he would have become acquainted with the Social Gospel Movement. The primary influence that the

development of sevā will come slightly later as the Western context afforded him an opportunity to reflect and lecture upon vast swaths of the Hindu tradition. Here at the beginning, sevā practice precedes sustained, critical reflection on sevā theory. The theoretical—theological and philosophical—justification for service becomes more developed in his later thinking.

With regards to the second question, why a sudden return to earlier concepts like sympathy and compassion, one must keep in the mind the novelty and radicalness of this teaching not just for India, but also for his brother disciples. Akhandananda, a close associate of Vivekananda and himself a pioneer in service within the Ramakrishna movement, expressed great uncertainty when he first wrote Vivekananda as to whether his desire to undertake service would be granted. Upon receiving permission, he assumed that amongst his brother disciples, he alone had been tasked to perform service.⁸⁶ Swami Yogananda was not alone in questioning the appropriateness of this undertaking as he wondered, ‘if we are not straying from the path chalked out by him [Ramakrishna].’⁸⁷ The fact that sevā became institutionalized by the Ramakrishna Movement can obscure those uncertain, even questioning first reactions following Vivekananda’s nearly out-of-

United States had upon him at this moment would have been in the form of juxtaposition, no doubt accompanied by a bit of culture shock.

⁸⁶ See Beckerlegge, ‘Swami Akhandananda’s *Sevāvrata*,’ 65-70.

⁸⁷ Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, 123. Central to Yogananda’s uncertainty about Vivekananda’s interpretation of Ramakrishna is his concern about Vivekananda’s faith in Ramakrishna. A few days following this first disagreement, Vivekananda and Yogananda exchanged heated words on this subject. In Gambhirananda’s account, V. ‘defended himself till his voice choked, his frame shook, and with tears streaming from his eyes, he left the room.’ Eventually he returned and said, ‘Oh, I have work to do! I am a slave of Ramakrishna, who left his work to be done by me and will not give me rest till I have finished it! And how shall I speak of him! Oh, his love for me!’ This emotional outcry convinced his brother disciples, and G. concludes, ‘the upshot of all this was that out of love for the leader the brother-disciples decided from that day not to question his interpretation of the Master’s life and teachings, nor his method of work.’ Ibid., 124.

nowhere exhortation.⁸⁸ The letters from late 1894 do not demonstrate a change in plan—social service is still commended strongly—but they do show Vivekananda toning down his rhetoric to ease his brothers into service. In any case, what is said in one or another letter would not necessarily spell out a ‘change in policy.’

One can understand the initial disorientation experienced by the early Ramakrishna community when they received Vivekananda’s letter. He had been in and out of communication with his brother disciples since he had left to wander through India to discern his future and that of the community he had been charged to lead. A select few like Alasinga in Madras and Ramakrishnananda in Kolkata served as intermediaries keeping the community abreast of Vivekananda’s goings-on in the United States, but in the years following Ramakrishna’s death most of the remaining disciples were also engaged in trying to figure out how best to carry on in their Master’s absence. Swami Gambhirananda describes the Math at this time as being ‘very much in a fluid state, with very few resident monks’ and adds ‘for a time things did no look bright...some entertained doubts about its permanence.’⁸⁹ A small contingent remained with the Holy Mother—Sarada Devi, Ramakrishna’s widow—and Ramakrishnananda, and a few joined their ranks while others passed through the newly acquired monastery in Alambazar intermittently between studies and pilgrimages. Hearing from Vivekananda, whom they had encountered more often in newspaper reports than in his own letters, and about his plan would have been surprising. However, according to Gambhirananda, many of the

⁸⁸ Only three of the letters sent in 1894 were addressed to the larger the Ramakrishna Community. The first two come from the summer and introduce sevā for the first time. The third is sent in November in which Vivekananda has returned to language of sympathy.

⁸⁹ Swami Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission*, 64.

disciples answered the call to organize and to serve and returned to the Math to begin their work. Fluidity soon gave way to organization.

Jīva Sevā: A Reworking of Sevā in Theory and Practice

As the wedding of social service with devotional sevā, jīva sevā required Vivekananda to rethink both the practice and the object of sevā. The overarching bhakti frame remains in place as he presents jīva sevā as worship and ‘worship as service.’ However, the object of service—the recipient of it—expands beyond God, the guru, and the community of devotees, to include now all persons. Vivekananda’s theological anthropology recognizes the divinity inherently present in all persons. Whether this divinity is established through identification by manifestation (Viśiṣṭādvaita or popular Advaita) or by identification by shared identity (Śaṅkara’s Advaita), Vivekananda views all persons to be possessing the divine within them. This judgment on human nature leads to a transformed understanding of sevā.

Devotional sevā directed towards humans must be practical. It must be able to meet not only the spiritual needs of the masses, but also their material needs. To borrow the language of Dalit theology, sevā’s ends include identity affirmation and liberative social vision. By stripping aside the accidental and seeing through to the essential nature of all persons, the *sevaka* (the performer of sevā) views others in a new way, in the correct way. The theoretical foundation for privilege and prejudice is undercut, and the actual practices of sevā challenge the social and religious institutions that maintain them. In turn, these practices purify and condition the *sevakas*, preparing them to realize the truth of their own nature.

In selecting to rework the concept of *sevā*, Vivekananda chose a practice with which the majority of his Hindu audience would have been familiar. Although the model that he builds upon has its roots in Vaiṣṇavism, and in particular Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, the performance of ritual service to a deity is not confined to any one particular confessional group. Alongside its broad familiarity and appeal, *sevā* also presupposes action. Commenting on Vallabha's (1481-1533) understanding of *bhakti* and *sevā*, S. N. Dasgupta states, '*bhakti* thus means the action of service (*sevā*)... *sevā* is a bodily affair, in order that it may be complete it implies love...love also for its completion requires service.'⁹⁰ For Vivekananda *sevā* offered a popular, practical, and even public understanding of religion that was an alternative his understanding of the more private, privileged, and philosophical pursuits of Vedānta.

We have seen already Vivekananda's stringent critique of devotional *sevā*'s ceremonial elements. The first half of his letter to his brother-disciples in 1894 is dedicated to combatting this 'indulging in madness.'⁹¹ Though his rhetoric is strong here, he does not totally reject this form of *sevā*. Under his leadership the Ramakrishna Math regularly performed devotional service to Kali as well as to Ramakrishna. What he did oppose was the extravagant excess of such practices that demonstrate a total disregard for others' suffering. The 1894 letter shows Vivekananda at his most disquieted, agitated by the amount of time, resources, and thought dedicated to 'external ceremonials.' All this energy directed towards ritual devotional service would be better directed towards the living God present in the suffering masses. Service to these is true service, and not the

⁹⁰ S. N. Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy: Volume 4*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961-2), 351. Quoted in Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 181.

⁹¹ *CWSV* 6.263, 'Epistle XLV,' (Brother-disciples, 1894, USA).

‘lunacy’ or ‘imbecility’ that marks debates on the ‘bell handle lengths’ or spending ‘millions of rupees’ to perform sevā in the temples.

In the October 1896 lecture in London titled ‘Vedic Religious Ideals,’ given a month before his first talk on Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda juxtaposes ceremonials’ externality with spirituality’s internality.⁹² Practices associated with the former create an impediment to realizing the ‘Purusha beyond.’ Vivekananda states, ‘love for ceremonials, dressing at certain times, eating in certain way, and shows and mummeries of religion like these are external religion, because you are satisfied with the senses and do not want to go beyond them.’⁹³ They veil the truth, creating plurality where there is only unity, and because they appeal to the senses, they are capable of ensnaring humanity in illusion.⁹⁴ Sevā reworked and redirected towards the divine present in all persons, builds upon humanity’s orientation towards the external, sense-experienced world. The duality he sees operative in devotion can be reoriented to the unity inherent in Advaita. It becomes preliminary and preparatory for deeper, inner spiritual realization, if it can be overcome. By changing the object of sevā the *sevakas* come to see the divinity present in human recipients and conversely they begin to realize their own divine nature.

Within the ceremonial context, Vivekananda advocates appropriating the material resources directed towards devotional practices for more socially engaged services. He

⁹² Perhaps the greatest moment of juxtaposition both in the content of his talk and its context—outside the Rameswaram Temple dedicated to Siva, Vivekananda states, ‘It is in love that religion exists and not in ceremony, in the pure and sincere love in the heart. Unless a man is pure in body and mind, his coming into a temple and worshipping Shiva is useless... External worship is only a symbol of internal worship; but internal worship and purity are real things... He who sees Siva in the poor, in the weak, and in the diseased, really worships Shiva; and if he sees Shiva only in the image, his worship is but preliminary. He who served and helped one poor man seeing Shiva in him, without thinking of his caste, or creed, or race, or anything, with him Shiva is more pleased than with the man who sees Him only in temples.’ *CWSV* 3: 141-2, ‘Address at the Rameswaram Temple,’ (Rameswaram, Tamil Nadu, 1897).

⁹³ *CWSV* 1. 354, ‘Vedic Ideals,’ (London, 10.13.1896)

⁹⁴ See *Ibid.*, 355-6.

does not call for the complete abandonment of ceremonials, but rather their toning down.

In an 1897 letter to Rakhal he writes:

Curtail the expenses of worship to a rupee or two per mensem. The children of the Lord are dying of starvation...worship with water and Tulasi leaves alone, and let the allowance for His Bhoga (food offerings) be spent in offering food to the Living God who dwells in the persons of the poor.⁹⁵

As the practice of *sevā* became more institutionalized, Vivekananda called for the creation of an *Annasatra* (feeding home) in which arrangement would be made 'for serving the really indigent people in the Spirit of God.'⁹⁶ Coupled with the *Sevasharam* (house of service), the newly acquired Belur property would function as both a dispensary of spiritual and material aid.

Beyond the Ramakrishna Community he encouraged his Indian audiences to adopt a similar practice in their own ritual devotion. An 1897 lecture titled 'Bhakti' shows Vivekananda recognizing that many persons need an image to help guide their devotion and allow them to reach spiritual maturation.⁹⁷ Although not dismissive of *murtis*, he offers the alternative of worshiping humans as the manifestations of God, which he identifies as the highest form of worship. He states:

Such a form of worship as getting some of these poor Narayanas, or blind Narayanas, and hungry Narayanas into every house every day, and giving them

⁹⁵ *CWSV* 6: 404, 'Epistle CXXXI,' (Rakhal, Almora, 7.3.1897).

⁹⁶ *CWSV* 7:159 'Conversations and Dialogues IX,' (Belur Math, 1898). Here Vivekananda communicates his plan for the use of Belur premises. Alongside of the Feeding Home there were to be a Temple of Learning and a House of Service. He outlines a detailed program of service and training, in which new students would be required to work in the House of Service and the Feeding home for five years before they could enter into the Temple of Learning. The purpose of this ordering is stated: 'By continuously practicing the gift of food, the Brahmacharins will have the idea of practical work for the sake of others and that of serving all beings in the spirit of the Lord firmly impressed in their minds. This will gradually purify their minds and lead to the manifestation of Sāttvika (pure unselfish) ideas. And having this the Brahmacharins will in time acquire the fitness for attaining the Knowledge of Brahman and become eligible for Sannyasa.' *Ibid.*, 159-60.

⁹⁷ 'If making a material temple helps a man more to love God, welcome; if making an image of God helps a man in attaining to the ideal of love, Lord bless him and give him twenty such images if he pleases. If anything helps him to attain that ideal of spirituality, welcome, so long as it is moral, because anything immoral will not help.' *CWSV* 3: 391, 'Bhakti' (Lahore, 11.9.1897).

worship they would give to an image, feeding them and clothing them, and the next day doing the same to others...the highest form and most necessary at the present India [is] this form of Narayana worship.⁹⁸

His justification for this practice is not founded upon a shared identity rooted in the ‘*tat tvam asi*’ ethic, but a recognition of the divinity of persons through God becoming manifest in them.

In another lecture at Lahore delivered just three days later titled ‘Vedanta’, he introduces ‘*tat tvam asi*’ through *Arundhati Nyāya* (the method of finding the *Arundhati* star by using a brighter star in close proximity). Here, the synthetic aspect of his Vedānta is clear, and this helps situate the earlier teaching on *sevā*. One moves from Dvaita to Viśiṣṭādvaita to finally arriving at Advaita: “‘Shvetaketu, That thou art.’ The Immanent One is at last declared to be the same that is in the human soul.’⁹⁹ Reading this teaching back into the kind of *sevā* commended three days earlier, worship can be understood as a practice akin to pointing to brighter, easier to see stars. The *sevaka* gradually advances from a Dvaita understanding of worship in which the divine is understood to be ‘external’ and distinct from nature to a Viśiṣṭādvaita understanding that sees the divine as ‘immanent’ in nature. In the former the divine is understood to be embodied in the *mūrti*, and in the latter it is manifested in the person receiving *sevā*. The final move would be to collapse even this distinction between service’s subject and object in order to realize the shared advaitic identity of non-difference between the two.¹⁰⁰ Vivekananda does not make this move in the ‘Bhakti’ lecture, but the subsequent ‘Vedanta’ lecture itself should be viewed as that final synthetic step.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ *CWSV* 3: 398, ‘The Vedanta,’ (Lahore, 11.12.1897).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

The ceremonial form of *sevā* directed towards God is not the only notion of *sevā* that Vivekananda reworks. He also appropriates the practice of offering *sevā* to one's guru and to one's community of devotees, but extends the acceptable recipients to include now all beings. In both instances, service offered to God and service offered to human persons and communities, the same term '*sevā*' is employed in order to highlight the esteemed place this practice holds within devotional communities as well as the underlying connection between God and God's devotees. Vivekananda's expansion of *sevā* to include beings beyond confessional boundaries marks a break from how it has been performed—though as seen with the Swaminarayan movement this move is not completely novel.¹⁰¹ Rather than offering compassion to beings outside the fold, Vivekananda calls for *sevā* and love to be given to all.

Vivekananda's *Sevā* and Vaiṣṇavism

As seen in the distinction that both Ramakrishna and Vivekananda make between compassion and service, the development of Vivekananda's understanding of *sevā* is one that is reflecting upon and responding to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, which has its roots in Śrīvaiṣṇavism. In order to appreciate the turn that Vivekananda makes, it is necessary to see how *sevā* functions within both these Vaiṣṇava traditions. This examination includes both the theological anthropology operative in Vaiṣṇava theology—rooted in Viśiṣṭādvaita—and whom these traditions recognize to be appropriate objects of devotional service.

¹⁰¹ However, even for the Swaminarayan movement while *sevā* is extended out beyond confessional boundaries, it is nevertheless understood to be for the welfare of the community.

In his study of Rāmānuja’s Śrīvaiṣṇava theology, John Carman notes the central place that service holds there. He states, ‘the implication of the relation between *śeṣi* and *śeṣa* that is stressed in the *Vedārthasaṃgraha* is that it is the essential nature of the creature to serve God. This is a doctrine that is present in all of Ramanuja’s writings, but nowhere is it stressed more than in the summary of his theology in the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*.’¹⁰² The *śeṣa-śeṣi* construct is key in establishing the relationship between the individual and the Lord, an important distinction between Viśiṣṭādvaita and Advaita.¹⁰³ Although *śeṣatva* is an essential quality of the individual self, for most persons becoming aware of this condition is extremely difficult and impossible without the grace of the Lord.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, it is difficult to find a person who has realized this relationship.¹⁰⁵ The community of devotees and the guru embody this anomaly, and for this reason being in their presence and in their service is salvifically efficacious.

¹⁰² John Braisted Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja: An Essay in Interreligious Understanding*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 151.

Interestingly, *The Brahmavadin* under Alasinga Perumal published twice into English significant portions of the *Vedārthasaṃgraha*—the first English translation of the text. The first round of translations begin in publications second issue and continued through the year (1895-96). The second translation was carried out over two and half years between May 1910 and December 1912. Between these two, *The Brahmavadin* published Rāmānuja’s commentary on the Bhagavadgita—a three and half year project that began in October 1905 and ended in May 1909. While it published essays on Śankara along with many of Vivekananda’s speeches and Ramakrishna’s saying, *The Brahmavadin* remained an important vehicle for presenting Śrīvaiṣṇavism to an English reading audience.

¹⁰³ In *Vedārthasaṃgraha* 121-2, Rāmānuja defines this relationship. He writes, ‘The sesa-sesi relationship in any situation means just this: the sesa is that whose essential nature consists solely in being useful to something else by virtue of its intention to contribute to the excellence to this other thing, and this other is the sesi.’ Rāmānuja further defines the relationship: ‘The Supreme Brahman—who is a treasure store of countless superlatively auspicious qualities, is flawless, possesses the infinitely great realm manifesting His Glory, and is an ocean of superlatively gracious condescension, beauty, and forgiving love—is the principle entity [*śeṣi*], and the self is the subordinate entity [*śeṣa*]. Therefore, when the Supreme Brahman is meditated upon as thus related [to the finite self], and when He is the object of superlative love, He causes that self to attain Him.’ Carman, *Theology of Rāmānuja*, 148, 152.

¹⁰⁴ See Francis X. Clooney, S. J., *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 146-9.

¹⁰⁵ In his commentary on *Bhagavad Gita* 7: 19 ‘At the end of many births, the man of knowledge finds refuge in Me, realizing that ‘Vasudeva is all.’ It is very hard to find such a great souled person,’ Rāmānuja states, ‘Further after passing through innumerable auspicious births, one gets the knowledge: “I find my sole joy as a śeṣa of Vasudeva. I find my essence, existence and activities to be dependent on Him.

The Śrīvaiṣṇavism theologians draw upon Puranic literature and the Alvars' poetry to establish the importance of *bhāgavataśeṣatva* (service to the Lord's devotees). In the *Garuda Purana*, the Lord states, 'one who ever is devoted to me, even if he is a dogcooker, is one I respect. He is to be given to and received from; indeed he is to be worshipped as myself.'¹⁰⁶ Commenting upon Nammalvar's *Tiruvaymoli* 8:10, Tirukkurukai Pirāṇ Piḷḷāṇ paraphrases Nammalvar desire to become a servant to the Lord's servants. He writes:

Though goals like wealth which are connected with Lordship abound, they cannot equal the goal of service to the Lord's followers. (8.10 intro). I want only to be with the servants of this Lord who takes me as his servant. I do not want the wonderful three worlds (8.10.1). Even obtaining the Lord is not equal to service to the Lord's followers...(8.10.3).¹⁰⁷

Even after the split between the Tēṇkalai and Vaṭakalai schools, both were in agreement on the important role *sevā* to devotees played. Maṇavālamāmuni, from the Tēṇkalai school, states, '*śeṣatva* to the Lord (*bhagavataśeṣatva*) extends as far as *śeṣatva* to the Lord's devotees (*bhāgavataśeṣatva*) which is its culmination...All the characteristics of the Tirumantra—*śeṣatva* to no other, have no other delight—go so far as to include his devotees.'¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Vedānta Deśika, from the Vaṭakalai school states:

He is superior over all others on account of His innumerable auspicious qualities...It is very hard to find such a person in this world.' Sri Rāmānuja *Gitabhasya* 7.19.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Patricia Mumme, *The Śrīvaiṣṇava Theological Dispute: Maṇavālamāmuni and Vedānta Deśika* (Madras: New Era Publications, 1988), 163.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in John Carman and Vasudha Narayanan, *The Tamil Veda: Piḷḷāṇ's Interpretation of the Tiruvāymḷi*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), 135. Carman and Narayanan help interpret 'this apparently extravagant rhetoric' found in Nammalvar and Piḷḷāṇ. They state, 'It seems to be another instance of that mysterious inversion of the normal hierarchy of being, an inversion due to the Lord's gracious condescension. The Lord emphasizes his willingness to regard his devotees as his higher than himself by inspiring the poet-saint to regard service to these devotees as his highest goal. We may also look at the matter from another angle. The devotee yearns for visible tangible connection with the Lord within this present world, and that connection is possible through the community of devotees.'

¹⁰⁸ *Mumukṣuppati* 89, 90. Quoted in Mumme, *Śrīvaiṣṇava Theological Dispute*, p. 163.

The Lord, who has His devotees as His body, is to be worshipped... The Lord loves service to Bhāgavatas as service towards His aspect as [the soul's] inner controller. Not only is [this service] highly loved by *śeṣi*, it manifest an indirect form of *śeṣatva*. The position of the supreme Lord, united with Śrī, as *śeṣi* (*śeṣitva*) should be [manifest] indirectly through the devotees whom He holds as His Self. An autonomous king who sports jewels he has worn and garlands that have been placed on him on the necks of his servants, elephants, and horses... In the same way, subservience (*śeṣatva*) to the Lord, which means being ready to appointment and use as the Lord desires out of utter dependence, extends to include subservience to His devotees, which is likewise coeternal with the soul [as is *śeṣatva* to the Lord].¹⁰⁹

Being amongst and offering service to the community of devotees is doubly beneficial for individual. First, close proximity to the community aids in the cultivation of the virtues necessary for surrender and liberation. Piḷlai Lokācārya highlights this process's passiveness in that the virtues present in the community will rub off naturally onto those near to them.¹¹⁰ Second, it strengthens the awareness of the individual's *śeṣatva* quality, further establishing this relationship between the individual and the divine through service to the community. Because the Lord delights in this mode of service, Piḷlai notes that 'even without knowledge and good conduct, relationship with [Bhāgavatas] is practically enough for attainment [of the Lord]; but even if one has both,

¹⁰⁹ *Rahasyatrayasāra* 16. Quoted in Mumme, *Srīvaiṣṇava Theological Dispute*, p. 179-80. For an extended treatment of Vedānta Deśika's presentation on *bhāgavataśeṣatva* see Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 'In Joyful Recognition: A Hindu Formulation of the Relationship between God and the Community and its Significance for Christian Theology,' *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 25.3 (1998). Clooney provides an important quotation from Deśika that highlights both the Lord's delight in the service a devotee offers to a fellow devotee and dynamic relationship this creates between and within community members. He quotes, 'Thus if each brings about the glory of the other without either depending on the glory the other effects, each is *śeṣa* to the other by bringing about the other's glory; but by likewise receiving that glory from the other, each is a *śeṣi* to the other...(492). By the savor of thus ordering the two of them as *śeṣa* and *śeṣi* to one another, the Lord Viṣṇu reaches the states of lord and enjoyer. In this manner their mutual *śeṣa* and *śeṣi* relationships are *śeṣa* to the Lord's state of being enjoyer. When they realize this, they attain the flawless human goal. (493-494).' Clooney presents how this relationship in and through the Lord's joy advances and spirals towards unlimited heights.

¹¹⁰ Piḷlai uses the example that if one field is full of water, nearby fields will demonstrate signs of seepage. He states, 'In the same way, as attainment draws near, these special characteristics will spontaneously develop.' *Srīvacana Bhūṣāna* 260-2. Quoted in Mumme, *Srī Vaiṣṇava Theological Dispute*, 162.

offending them is sufficient for loss.’¹¹¹ Service to the community benefits the community, but more importantly it benefits especially and specially its performer.

Unsurprisingly, service offered to one’s guru or to the ācārya surpasses that even offered to the community. Both Sṛīvaiṣṇava schools logically establish its ultimate place within devotion. Maṇavāḷamāṁuni states, ‘All Bhāgavatas are even more pleased by service to the ācārya whom they love than by service to themselves. Therefore, the final stage of service to the ācārya will occur as the culmination of the goal.’¹¹² Deśika appeals to the principle ‘how much more,’ noting that if service to Bhāgavatas leads to salvation, ‘there is no doubt regarding those who have resorted to an ācārya.’¹¹³ Whereas the community passively influences the servant, the ācārya actively guides the aspirant in accordance to the tradition and with the aspirant’s own qualifications and capabilities. Deśika offers a quotation from Mutaliyāṇṭāṇ, one of Rāmānuja’s disciples, as well as a verse from the *Nyāsa Tilaka* to illustrate this point. He states:

Mutaliyāṇṭāṇ, once said: ‘just as the insects on the body of a lion [go with him] as he leaps from one hill to another, when Ramanuja crossed over samsara, by virtue of the intimate connection, we too will cross over.’

A blind man can travel along by leaning on a sighted person, a man in the hull of a boat is led by the boatman. The children of servants who do not even know the king still enjoy the delights [of the palace]. In the same way my compassionate ācārya can make me attain You.¹¹⁴

Without the help of an ācārya, acting in accompaniment with the Lord’s grace, the student has little chance in achieving the liberation he or she desires. Just as the community mediates the Lord’s grace (they constitute the Lord’s body manifest), the ācārya does so as well, but in a more immediate and intense way. Piḷḷai Lokācārya even

¹¹¹ Sṛīvacana Bhūṣāna 204. Quoted in Mumme, Sṛī Vaiṣṇava *Theological Dispute*, 165.

¹¹² Sṛīvacana Bhūṣāna 413. Quoted in Mumme, Sṛīvaiṣṇava *Theological Dispute*, 243.

¹¹³ *Rahasyatrayasāra* 8. Quoted in Mumme, Sṛīvaiṣṇava *Theological Dispute*, 253.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

argues that resorting to the ācārya can be more efficacious than resorting to the Lord.¹¹⁵

Along with instruction, the teacher allows for virtue to flourish by again establishing the *śeṣatva* quality of student. Finally, service performed here is not an act of repayment to the teacher; the gift received from one's instructor exceeds anything the student can offer in return. This too affirms the *sesa-sesi* relationship.

The Srīvaiṣṇava tradition stresses the positive impact that such service to the community and ācārya can have on the individual practitioner. It conditions the individual, allows for the requisite virtues to blossom, and in the case of the guru effectively instructs him or her on the means to achieve surrender and liberation. However, within this framework there is little emphasis on the effect that service has upon the community or the guru. Its effect on broader society is even more indirect—that is the flourishing of the community has a benefit for society as a locus of the Lord's grace. Even in the Tēṅkalai school's liberal treatment of *jāti* and *varṇa*, service's extremely community-centric nature limits the scope of its application.¹¹⁶ Confessional lines create the boundary between those to whom devotional service should be offered and to those whom it should not. In fact, a devotee should be extremely cautious in all interactions that occur beyond this confessional boundary as non-devotees can have an equally negative effect upon the individual as the community has positive.

¹¹⁵ He establishes this argument through an anatomical analogy. Resorting to the Lord directly is like grasping the hand of a powerful person. Perhaps sympathy may be shown, but there is a possibility that from his autonomy he might reject the supplicant. There is doubt as to the outcome in such appeal. Resorting to the ācārya is like grasping that person's foot by which he or she is incapable of refusing such a plea. The results are guaranteed. *Srīvacana Bhūṣāna* 427, cited in in Mumme, *Srīvaiṣṇava Theological Dispute*, 240.

¹¹⁶ Regarding Deśika and the Vāṭakalia school on caste for those who have taken refuge, Clooney states, 'Theirs is a new life entirely free from grief and anxiety—because all is in God's hands—yet still disciplined regarding what he sees as necessary and presupposed societal expectations (such as caste) that govern the lives even of people living in accord with God's will.' Clooney, *Beyond Compare*, 190.

The society and the world, however, are not abandoned, but the language of interaction between the Lord/community/devotee and the world changes. Rather than offering service, they offer *dayā/kāruṇya* (compassion). On account of his *dayā* the Lord makes what is inaccessible accessible—his very person through his incarnations.¹¹⁷ The *prema* (love) or *vātsalya* (protecting/parental love) the Lord shows is a specially reserved for his devotees, much like service, but *dayā* necessarily comes before this. It is the Lord's compassion and the devotee's response to it that allows for love to follow. Rāmānuja defines *dayā* as, 'the inability to endure the suffering of others and disregard of one's own advantages.'¹¹⁸ Moved by the suffering of others, one compassionately acts to alleviate their condition. The suffering of persons in the world moves the Lord, and following the example of the Lord the community, to act so as to bring about its end. This suffering, however, is not material suffering, e.g. poverty or hunger, though materiality contributes to it. Instead, it is suffering born from *avidyā* (ignorance)—an epistemic and spiritual condition. Compassion begins the process of its cessation through presence (the community embodies the ideal) and instruction. Some may respond, many will not, but the community should maintain a compassionate disposition towards the world and society.

Vivekananda's *sevā* has for its basic frame both Vaiṣṇava theology and practice. Although the particular Vaiṣṇava community he most frequently encountered and interacted with was the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas and not Ramanuja's Sriaiṣṇavas, there is

¹¹⁷ Carman highlights this categorical distinction in Rāmānuja's thinking. He states, 'the quality of compassion...seems to have less relevance to this intimate sphere of God's communion with his devotee, yet that general concern for the happiness of creatures and distress at their misery is the basis of these more specific and dramatic Divine qualities.' Carman, *The Theology of Rāmānuja*, 198.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 189.

sufficient overlap between the two schools' practices of service.¹¹⁹ Bhaktivinoda Thakur, the Bengali Vaiṣṇava contemporary of Vivekananda, states in his *Sri Navadvipa-dhama-mahatmya* (1890) that one of the two aspects of Ramanuja's Śrīvaiṣṇavism Caitanya appropriated was 'service to devotees.'¹²⁰ Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism also draws a distinction between those persons who should receive service—the guru and the community of devotees—and those who should receive compassion—all other jīvas. As previously noted, this division is based upon Caitanya's summation of Gauḍīya practice as *nama ruci*, *jīva daya*, and *Vaiṣṇava seva*.¹²¹ Krishna's compassion serves again as the model

¹¹⁹ From the side of theory, Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism is a combination of Ramanuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and Madhvacharya's *Dvaita* system. Caitanya calls this system *acintyabhedābheda* (inconceivable non-difference [*ābheda*] in difference [*bheda*]). Nothing is different from Krishna, and yet Krishna is different from everything, hence the inconceivable, paradoxical nature of the teaching. Nicholson states, 'the system's notion of 'inconceivability' (*acintyatva*) is a central concept used to reconcile apparently contradictory notions, such as simultaneous oneness and multiplicity of Brahman and the difference and non-difference of God and his powers.' Nicholson, *Unifying Hinduism*, 35. See also Ravi M. Gupta, *The Caitanya Vaiṣṇava Vedānta of Jīva Gosvāmī: When Knowledge Meets Devotion*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 45-55. While rejecting the *advaita* position outright, *acintyabhedābheda* holds in tension *Viśiṣṭādvaita* and *Dvaita* readings of Scripture. Should this tension break, the inconceivable would become conceivable, and the Scriptures would become contradictory.

¹²⁰ Bhaktivinoda Thakur, *Sri Navadvipa-dhama-mahatmya* 16. In this hagiographical account, Caitanya is presented as a synthesizer who draws out two essential teachings from four Vaiṣṇava schools. He states, 'Later, when I begin the sankirtana movement, I Myself will preach the essence of the four Vaisnava philosophies. From Madhva I will receive two essential items: his complete defeat of the Mayavada philosophy, and his service to the Deity of Kṛṣṇa, accepting the Deity as an eternal spiritual being. From Ramanuja I will accept two great teachings: the concept of bhakti unpolluted by karma and jnana, and service to the devotees. From Visnusvami's teachings I will accept two main elements: the sentiment of exclusive dependence on Kṛṣṇa, and the path of raga-bhakti. And from you [Nimbarka] I will receive two excellent principles: the necessity of taking shelter of Rādhā, and the high esteem for the gopis' love of Kṛṣṇa.' http://www.gauranga-prema.ch/Navadvip_dham_mahatmya.pdf, p. 46.

¹²¹ This distinction is also found in Rūpa Gosvāmī's *Śrī Bhakti-rasāmṛta-sindhu*. Rupa provides an extensive list of the varying types of devotees, placing them in relation to their devotional disposition (rooted in Indian *rasa* aesthetics) and the steadfastness of this quality. Within the *dāsa* (servant) category he identifies three sub-types: *dhūrya*, *dhīra*, and *vīra*. The *dhūrya* type are those devotees who 'show suitable affection (*prīti*) towards Kṛṣṇa, His intimates, and His devotees' (3.2.49). He continues, 'Just as Kṛṣṇa appears as the object of service (*sevyatayā*) for me, His dear women are also the objects of service. I consider them my very life. I fear even to think of that rash person who simply makes a pretense of being a devotee. However, even a person who has affection for a donkey that has offered respect for Kṛṣṇa is blessed with good health' (3.2.50). This is a considerable expansion to who qualifies as one of the Lord's devotees. Later Rupa presents Mayūradhvaja as an example of person resolute in compassion. He states, 'I offer my respects with folded hands to Mayūradhvaja. Alas! Desiring to offer half of his body to Kṛṣṇa disguised as a *brāhmaṇa*, he ordered his wife and son to cleave his head with a saw. Oh! In telling this tale, my voice chokes up./If Mayūradhvaja had been aware that the *brāhmaṇa* were actually Kṛṣṇa, he would not have displayed such compassion. Without the display of compassion, he would instead be a clear example

for *jīva daya* in which spiritual teaching, especially relating the efficacy of the Divine name, becomes the primary practice. Misery and suffering are first spiritual/epistemic problems from which physical and psychological suffering emerge as a direct result. Compassion offers a means of relief as well as a means to become a devotee. One would not offer compassion to a devotee nor would one offer service to non-devotee. In both instances it would neither be beneficial nor appropriate.

Turning to Ramakrishna's statement and Vivekananda's 1884 commentary on *sevā*, one can see now the particular teachings and practices with which they are interacting. Ramakrishna opens by briefly explaining the essence of Vaiṣṇava doctrine. He states, 'That doctrine teaches that one should always be careful to observe three things, namely, a taste for God's name, kindness to all beings and the worship of Vaishnavas.'¹²² Rather than Vaiṣṇavism in the abstract or generic, he is presenting the particular essence of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism. As he continues to explain the import of these three concepts, he draws out the distinction between devotees/service and other beings (*jīvas*)/compassion. Here there is a double transference of identity that makes devotees appropriate objects of service. The first occurs between the name 'God' and the possessor of the name—that which the name points to—God. The second, between the devotee, who possesses the name in a different sense, and God, is what allows the devotee to be an appropriate object of respect, service, and devotion.¹²³ Compassion offered to all other

of *dāna-vīra*, one who gives to the Lord in surrender' (4.3.51-2). Ultimately, Rupa identifies this compassion as *bhakti* because of its object being Kṛṣṇa, even though he was in disguise, and the king's enduring *rati* (pleasure) for him. However, that such a clarification was necessary and when coupled with the previous quotation on service to devotees, demonstrates that compassion and *sevā* are not interchangeable terms. They are distinct actions because they have different objects as their ends.

¹²² Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, 817.

¹²³ The *Caitanya Caritamṛta*, a biographical account of Caitanya's teachings, reveals the transformative quality of the divine name: 'So at the beginning of the rising of the name, sins and the rest are dispelled; and when it is risen there is the manifestation of *prema* at the feet of Kṛṣṇa *Mukti* is an

beings comes from the ‘conviction in one’s heart that the whole universe belongs to Krishna.’¹²⁴ The language of identity is dropped, and out of reverence for Krishna and his sovereignty one is to offer compassion to all beings. Ramakrishna’s summation is a fair representation of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism from someone who is not follower.

Following this summary, Saradananda recounts how Ramakrishna entered into a state of ecstasy. When he had regained partial consciousness, he offered a corrective to the Vaiṣṇava teaching, ‘Talk of compassion for beings! Will you, all little animals, bestow compassion on beings? You wretch, who are you to bestow it?’¹²⁵ Recalling Ramakrishna’s concern with the performance of public charity—that it is a practice performed most frequently in self-interest—his comment on compassion here seems appropriate. The only persons capable of offering compassion like Krishna are those who have completely renounced the fruits of their work. This reworking is not quite the radical break as it first appears. Just like service, the action of offering compassions necessitates both a capable subject—for the Vaiṣṇavism the devotee qualifies as one—and an appropriate object. Ramakrishna, however, does not view his disciples nor the majority of persons as having achieved the necessary spiritual outlook that qualifies one for compassion.

The more radical move comes in reworking sevā. For the Vaiṣṇavas it is to be offered only to the Lord, his intimates, and the community of devotees. Ramakrishna,

insignificant result, from a hint of the name’ (CC 3.3.175-6). Not only are sins removed, but liberation is achieved through the divine name—here liberation is ‘insignificant’ (*tuccaphala* [incidental result]), and to remain in constant devotional service (*bhakti*) is the supreme goal (*paramapurūsārtha*). Edward C. Dimock, *Caitanya Caritamṛta of Kṛṣṇadāsa Kavirāja: A Translation and Commentary*, ed. by Tony K. Stewart (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Quoted in Lance Nelson, ‘The Ontology of *Bhakti*: Devotion as *Paramapurūsārtha* in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Madhusūdana Sarasvatī,’ *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32.4 (2004): 349.

¹²⁴Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, 817.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 818.

however, presents all jīvas as being appropriate objects of sevā. He establishes this acceptability by returning to identity. He states, ‘No, no; not compassion to Jivas but service to them as Siva.’¹²⁶ Here he has not only reworked the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava understanding of sevā, but he has switched deities as well. One is not to see Krishna as being manifested in all jīvas; instead, he or she is to see Śiva as the ultimate reality that stands behind all things. A Vaiṣṇava practice has now become reoriented in light of Ramakrishna’s Śiva sevā.¹²⁷

Aside from drawing a distinction between his teaching and Vaiṣṇava practice, the introduction of Siva into this formula fits with one of Ramakrishna’s favorite stories from Sankara’s life.¹²⁸ The story of Śaṅkara and the Chaṇḍāla is from the popular, hagiographical Advaita tradition. The story begins with Śaṅkara in Varanasi just having taken a purifying bath. On his way through the streets he encounters a Chaṇḍāla, a Dalit, and admonishes him to keep his distance, lest the now purified Śaṅkara become polluted.¹²⁹ Upon hearing this command, the Chaṇḍāla challenges him in accordance with advaitic thought as to whom he wishes to, ‘Go away,’ the body—the accidental form—or the soul—the essential form. Realizing the errors of his ways and that the Chaṇḍāla is actually Śiva in disguise, he composes a five-verse Sanskrit hymn that concludes:

Oh Lord! In the form of body I am your servant (dāsa). In the form of life, O three-eyed one [Siva], I am part of your self. In the form of soul, you are within

¹²⁶ Ibid. The Bengali original is ‘na, na --jive doya noy, Shivgyane, jiv seba’ (no, no, not compassion to jīvas, knowing Siva, service to jīvas).

¹²⁷ This is not a total displacement of Krishna (Visnu) with Siva in Ramakrishna’s teaching. As recorded in *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, he states, ‘I see Rāma in all things. You are all sitting here, but I see only Rāma in everyone of you.’ *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Ch. 36.

¹²⁸ In *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* about half of the direct references to Śaṅkara relate to his encounter to his encounter with Shiva. The form Shiva takes differs in accounts—sometime Siva is a Chaṇḍāla other times a butcher—but the import is the same: Śaṅkara’s failure to realize the truth of his teaching at the most practical level and need for Śiva to offer a final corrective.

¹²⁹ This is an important story for dalits as well, and they understand the dalit-turned-Siva to be a Brahmin interpolation to the original story.

me and in every other soul. I have arrived at this conclusion through my intellect and on the authority of the various scriptures.¹³⁰

That Ramakrishna may be alluding to this verse is suggested more in the Bengali version of his statement than in its English translation. The Bengali version is, ‘*Shivjnane, jiv seba,*’ (knowing Siva, service to jīvas). The English translation—‘service to them as Siva’—connects the dots between realization and action, but in doing so drops the important ‘knowing’ or ‘realizing’ from the phrase. The impetus and appropriateness of sevā is derived from the identification of all beings with Siva. What this form of sevā would look like in practice remains unmentioned. Overall, Ramakrishna’s teaching on jīva sevā is rather terse, especially in compassion to Vivekananda’s. Most importantly, he has provided Vivekananda with a means for applying sevā to the broader category of jīvas.

Vivekananda is able to draw out many fruitful insights from Ramakrishna’s brief statement that will become central to his own understanding of sevā. First, he understands this teaching on service to be an example of Ramakrishna’s synthetic approach that brings together Vedānta—i.e. Śaṅkara and jñāna—and bhakti. The aim of Vedānta, attaining liberating knowledge, remains the goal, but the addition of bhakti both softens the undertaking and brings the pursuit of knowledge out from the forest and into ‘human habitation and the work-a-day world.’¹³¹ Second, this synthesis makes Vedānta practical. Alongside being able to be performed in the world rather than apart from it, service can and should be performed by all persons regardless of the spiritual path he or she takes. For *jñāna-yogis* service prepares them to awaken to the truth that they are ‘the eternally

¹³⁰ *Manīṣapañcakam* 6.

¹³¹ Swami Saradananda, *Sri Ramakrishna: The Great Master*, 817. He describes Vedānta as being ‘generally regarded as dry, austere, and even cruel.’

pure, awake and free, and bliss Absolute.’¹³² For *bhakti-yogis*, seeing ‘Shiva or Narayana’ in all will undoubtedly lead them to see God (Brahman) and ‘attain true devotion.’ For *karma-yogis* work performed as service creates the proper detachment from the fruits of action, ‘allowing them to reach their goal sooner than otherwise.’ For all, service is a preparatory means that ensures that the end of each spiritual path will be achieved.

Thirteen years later and with a more established advaitic foundation, Vivekananda refers again to Chaitanya. In an 1897 letter from Almora, Vivekananda states:

One possessing Vairagya does not understand by Atman the individual ego but the All-pervading Lord, residing as the Self and Internal Ruler in all. He is perceivable by all as the sum total. This being so, as Jiva and Ishvara are in essence the same, serving the Jivas and loving God must mean one and the same thing. Here is the peculiarity: when you serve a Jiva with the idea that he is a Jivam it is Dayā (compassion) and not Prema (love); but when you serve him with the idea that he is the self, that is Prema. That Atman is the one objective of love is know from Shruti, Smriti, and direct perception. Bhagavān Chaitanya was right, therefore, when he said, “Love to God and compassion to Jivas.” This conclusion of the Bhagavan, intimating differentiation between Jiva and Ishvara, was right, as He was a dualist. But for us, Advaitists, this notion of Jiva as distinct from God is the cause of bondage. Our principle should be love, and not compassion. The application of the word compassion even to Jiva seems to me to be rash and vain. For us, it is not to pity but to serve. Ours is not the feeling of compassion but of love, and the feeling of Self in all.¹³³

In previous statements the anthropology that supported his view appeared ambiguous as to why service and love rather than compassion should be offered to jīvas. Whether it is founded in recognition by analogy or identification by manifestation, Vivekananda argued for sevā to all persons with an anthropology that could fit with dualist and qualified non-dualist understandings—with the major exception being his insistence to expand the category to include not just devotees, but all persons. It does not

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ *CWSV* 5: 133, ‘Epistle LXXVII,’ (Sharat Chandra Chakravarty, Almora, 7.3.1897).

seem to be the case that such ambiguity served a pragmatic purpose as is the case in his public reworking of sevā as a practice. In those lectures and talks he moved from a dualist to qualified non-dualist and finally non-dualist understanding. This letter, however, shows Vivekananda fully relying on advaitic anthropology to justify seva as a practice as well as to distinguish it from other devotional practices.

Vivekananda's re-working of devotional seva into a practice of social seva demonstrates the use of his Practical Vedanta categories to help inform the practice. Both Vedānta's practical and synthetic qualities are employed with the dual purpose of bringing persons to the realization of non-difference and leading to the transformation of society. The anthropological judgment that all persons possess the divine within allows for seva to be offered to them, which in turn necessarily requires one to serve. When performed with the proper disposition, seva can lead to identity affirmation and societal transformation.

Jīva Sevā: Identity Affirmation and Liberative Social Vision

Identity Affirmation

Although the categories 'identity affirmation' and 'liberative social vision' belong to Dalit theology, both are analogously operative in Vivekananda's project of jīva sevā. More than his master Ramakrishna, Vivekananda linked the social and spiritual. Ramakrishna often presented social engagement as a potentially distracting endeavor that took the individual away from spiritual practices and puffed a person's ego. His more positive statements on social service, including the 1884 statement, position social service as resulting after one has attained insight into non-difference. It is the *viññānis*

who can correctly perform the service because they know that all beings are non-different from themselves.

While incorporating much of his Master's teachings, Vivekananda shifts the occurrence and necessity of social service to being prior to spiritual realization's onset. It is a practice that leads to and culminates in the experience of the liberating knowledge of non-difference. In conditioning oneself to see the Lord present in all beings through the practice of *sevā*, one conditions oneself to experience non-difference with the created world. From this experience one attains the experience of non-difference with Brahman. *Sevā* is a stepping-stone, or given Vivekananda's synthetic Vedānta, it is a stepladder leading to greater and greater spiritual maturity that culminates in an advaitic experience. Up until the individual attains this experience, the individual's focus on his or her non-difference with all beings through service and non-difference with Brahman through study mutually strengthen one another. They are two interconnected means to approach and overcome the problem of ignorance.

In tracing the historical development of Vivekananda's ideas of *sevā* and Practical Vedanta, one sees that its initial formulation predates Practical Vedanta by about two years. A contextual analysis of both initially suggests that *sevā* is directed primarily towards his Indian audience and Practical Vedanta towards his Western audience. While acknowledging some overlap between the two ideas—most notably in his 1897 lecture in Lahore—Beckerlegge argues that the historical development and contextual deployment of both challenge the assumption that Practical Vedanta provides the theoretical and philosophical basis for *sevā* and that it is simply the 'practical outworking of this

philosophy.’¹³⁴ He concludes that they represent two distinct projects occurring at two distinct phases of Vivekananda’s life.¹³⁵

Beckerlegge is undoubtedly the living authority when it comes Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Movement’s presentation of *sevā*, but in this instance his near exhaustive research may have ended with an inability to see the forest for the trees. Beckerlegge focuses particularly on Vivekananda’s language, and when he fails to use ‘Practical Vedanta’ frequently in India Beckerlegge determines that he has left it behind. Vrinda Dalmiya drawing upon Vivekananda’s teachings and Beckerlegge’s own work reaches a different conclusion—one that approaches more nearly the generally held assumption regarding the relationship between *sevā* and Practical Vedanta. She begins with two understandings of “practical” in Practical Vedanta’ to which Beckerlegge hints.¹³⁶ The first, which Dalmiya sees as most important, is that practical means ‘engagement with life or the world.’ She identifies ‘service/work as worship’ to be its practice. The second is ‘direct apprehension of non-dualism in opposition to a mere theoretical understanding of it.’ These are both pretty standard definitions for the practical nature of Practical Vedanta, but Dalmiya offers a third. She states:

Now, if we probe into the roots of the verb ‘real-ize’—to make real—we could draw out a third sense implicit in the first two above. ‘Practical’ would now means *charting a route* that needs to be followed in order to translate the theory of metaphysical non-duality into either a lived experience (spiritual realization) or social action (ethics) or both...In effect then Practical Vedanta collapses the distinctions between an intellectual understanding of the truth and a lived realization of it into a new way of life aimed at social reform.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Beckerlegge, *Swami Vivekananda’s Legacy of Service*, 214-5.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 246-251. The penultimate section of her work is titled ‘Two Projects: “Service as Worship” and Practical Vedanta.’

¹³⁶ Vrinda Dalmiya, ‘The Metaphysics of Ethical Love: Comparing Practical Vedanta and Feminist Ethics,’ *Sophia* 48 (2009): 224.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

In light of Dalmiya's third understanding, *sevā* provides that pivotal route that leads to spiritual realization and social action or identity affirmation and a liberative social vision.

Central to understanding how *sevā* provides a guiding practice that culminates in identity affirmation is the essential place *anubhāva* (perception, apprehension) holds in Vivekananda's Vedānta.¹³⁸ For Vivekananda *anubhāva* as an experience of direct perception is the realization advaitic truth. He states, 'mere believing in certain theories and doctrines will not help you much. The mighty word that came out from the sky of spirituality in India was Anubhuti, realization, and ours are the only books which declare again and again: "The Lord is to be *seen*."' ¹³⁹ Theory gained from *śruti* and *smṛti* is necessary, and Vivekananda frequently appeals to both in his teaching. Alongside *tat tvam asi*, which points to the non-difference between atman (the individual self) and Brahman (the Supreme Self), he routinely cites or paraphrases from the *Īśa Upaniṣad* and Bhagavadgita those passages that point to the non-difference between beings.¹⁴⁰ To complete the triangle between the individual self, other selves, and the Supreme Self, he again turns to the Gita: 'He who sees the Supreme Lord equally present in all creatures,

¹³⁸ Rambachan states, 'one cannot overestimate the importance of experience of direct perception in Vivekananda's philosophy of religion. It is this he signifies by the frequently used expression *realization* and that may, with good reason, be said to constitute the central and most outstanding feature of his religious thought.' Rambachan, *The Limits of Scripture*, p. 94-5. As noted in the previous chapter, Rambachan highlights Vivekananda's placement of *anubhava* ahead of *śruti* as valid means of knowledge to be one of the chief differences between Vivekananda/Neo-Vedānta and Sankara. In his earlier work *Accomplishing the Accomplished*, Rambachan identifies *śruti* to be the only valid means of knowledge for Sankara. Some reviewers, most notably Arvind Sharma, challenged Rambachan's conclusion because of his exclusion of *anubhava*. Sharma had an earlier essay concluded that, '*anubhava*, then, is *pramāṇa* according to Śaṅkara but not in the usual sense—just as in the fact that, say, after an accident, the awareness that one is alive may be enough evidence *for oneself* that one is alive, but the *doctor* needs the evidence of vital signs to know that one is alive.' Arvind Sharma, 'Is Anubhava a *Pramāṇa* according to Śaṅkara?', *Philosophy East and West* 42.3 (1992): 522.

¹³⁹ CWSV 3: 377, 'The Common Bases of Hinduism,' (Lahore, 1897).

¹⁴⁰ 'One who sees all beings in the self alone and the self in all beings, feels no hatred by virtue of that understanding. For the seer of ones, who knows all beings to be the self, where is delusion and sorrow.' *Īśa Upaniṣad* 6-7. 'Yoked in yoga, he sees himself in all creatures, all creatures in himself—he sees everything the same.' Bhagavadgita 6.29.

not perishing while these creatures perish, he sees indeed. When he sees the lord equally present everywhere, he himself no longer hurts the self” (BG 13.27-28a). These verses are selected by Vivekananda not only for the metaphysical import, but also because they use the verb ‘to see’ ($\sqrt{ikṣ}$; $\sqrt{paś}$) and not ‘to know’ (\sqrt{vid} ; $\sqrt{jñā}$).

Vivekananda is not unmoored from the scriptural tradition, but Rambachan is correct to note that he does not place great importance on the exegetical study of *śruti*, which he categorizes as a kind of ‘mental/intellectual gymnastics.’ His Practical Vedanta nevertheless necessarily requires *śruti* and *smṛti* texts in which they are honored and used, but not studied. While he perhaps makes a greater claim on the intellect’s ability to reason apart from scripture than Śaṅkara does, he does not claim that these truths are independently self-evident. He does draw a distinction between possessing a purely theoretical understanding of these texts and having realized their truth, but he is not unique in this. Only in rare instances does one perceive/realize non-duality from simply hearing (*śravaṇa*) or thinking (*manana*) about scripture. If it were so easy, simply hearing *tat tvam asi* and thinking it correct would result in liberating knowledge. Unfortunately for most, it does not. Instead constant reflection upon passages such as *tat tvam asi*—grounded in the practice of *sevā* rather than textual exegesis—leads to brief experiences of non-differences, which become the focus of meditation (*nididhyāsana*) as *sevā* leaves to .¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Without requiring the practice of reflection as guided and skillful textual exegesis, Vivekananda comes close to collapsing reflection and meditation upon each other. His understanding of the practical nature of texts like, ‘The Self, my dear Maitreya, should be realized—should be heard of, reflected upon, and meditated upon’ (BU II.4.5) follows Śaṅkara, but is again interpreted through the lens of *sevā*. Śaṅkara states, ‘We say that they are meant for weaning one back from objects towards which one inclines naturally. For a man hankering after the highest goal and engaging in outward objects under the idea, “May good come to me, may not evil befall me,” but failing to achieve thereby the highest human goal, there are such texts as, “The Self, my dear Maitreya, should be realized.” These turn him from the objects, naturally

The way that *sevā* culminates in *anubhāva* requires for all three non-different relationships to be held in tension so as to be realized: 1) non-difference between the individual self and Supreme self, 2) non-difference between the individual self and other selves, and 3) the non-difference between other selves and the Supreme self. The synthetic nature of *sevā*, just as in Practical Vedānta, allows for a gradual progression towards the perception of non-difference. *Sevā* begins, for most persons, with dualism, difference. One sees one's self as different from the Supreme Self usually identified as one's particular deity. In this form it resembles devotional service offered to the deity.

In order to overcome this natural dualism, Vivekananda appeals to those scriptures that present the Lord as pervading or being manifest in other selves. He identifies this stage as relating to qualified non-dualism, 'I in you, you in me, and all is God.'¹⁴² Here the second two levels of non-difference are revealed, but not in a strict non-dualistic way. Vivekananda does not elaborate on qualified non-dualism's understanding of the relationship between the individual finite self and the Supreme self or how one is to understand the Lord's indwelling, pervading, and manifesting in the material world. However, he does note that 'the highest Advaitism cannot be brought down to practical life. Advaitism made practical works from the plane of Vishishtadvaitism.'¹⁴³ Without his synthetic understanding of Vedānta, such a statement

attracting his body and sense etc. towards them, and then they lead him along a current of the indwelling Self" (BSBh I.1.4).

The *Brahma Sūtras* address *nididhyāsana* beginning in BS IV.1.1. Commenting on IV.1.2 that continues on the theme of the repetition of practice (hearing, thinking, meditating). Śāṅkara states, 'the sentence "That thou art" cannot produce a direct realization of its own meaning in those people to whom these two entities remain obstructed by ignorance, doubt, and confusion; for the meaning of a sentence is dependent on the meaning of the words (constituting it). Thus it is that for the such people it becomes desirable to resort repeatedly to scriptures and reasoning that lead to a clarification of concepts' (BSBh IV.1.2). Vivekananda substitutes practice for reasoning in the practice of *sevā*.

¹⁴² *CWSV* 6: 122, 'Notes of Class Talks and Lectures,' (California, 1900).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

would strain logic. The import of this statement is a seemingly strange, but necessary concession that Vivekananda makes regarding strict non-dualism: that while it supplies the foundation for all morality, without having realized the truth of non-difference—as in the example of *vijñāni*—a general notion of it is not immediately conducive to ethical action. A qualified non-dualism like Ramanuja's posits the ultimate reality of the material world; strict non-dualism can recognize it only as penultimate. For the time being such a worldview is required for *sevā* to be performed—an object other than one's self is needed for service.

The final step is the introduction of the first statement of non-difference into the equation. *Sevā* has conditioned the person and helped him or her to advance from dualism to qualified non-dualism by steadily establishing the view that the Lord is in all beings and as such all beings are the Lord made manifest. With scriptural statements that reveal the same self as being present also in all beings, Vivekananda again through scriptural statements coupled with reason goes on to identify non-difference between the individual self and the Supreme Self. Here, there is a straight and natural progression by the principle of association to arrive at one's own self being non-different with the Supreme Self. On the whole, *sevā* is a very simple practice and teaching that is conducive with most persons' devotional disposition. Absent are strenuous mental gymnastics required to mine scripture for liberating truth, however they are required so as to advance the individual towards non-difference. One may very well assume that without rigor—textual or mental—the system fails as easily as it would seem to succeed. For his part, Vivekananda does not deny the difficulty in attaining realization. Ignorance is as

pernicious and as it is pervasive, and one encounters many obstacles like privilege and prejudice—which *sevā* seeks to uproot—that hinder liberation's advent.

Liberative Social Vision

Sevā also contributes to the realization of Vivekananda's liberative social vision.

Although he did not fancy himself a reformer, Vivekananda hoped that a nation-wide program of spiritual regeneration would lead to a new nation grounded in timeless ideals.

The primary goal of Practical Vedanta was to bring the truths of Vedānta out from the forest and into the streets. The intent was not only to increase access to Vedānta to those who previously could not undertake the rigorous study needed to attain liberating knowledge, but also to allow the truths of Vedānta to impact all levels of society. He recognized the powerful social and ethical dimension potential present in Vedānta, and did not want its import to be realized by a select few living a part from society.

While in London a few weeks after his lecture on Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda tells the story of priest who is very much like Ramakrishna's Śaṅkara of hagiography.

After speaking so eloquently on Vedānta and the non-difference between all souls, the priest jumps out of the way as a low-caste person approaches him. When asked, 'why do you jump,' the priest replies, 'because his very touch would have polluted me.'

Vivekananda continues, 'but you were just saying we are all the same, and you admit that there is no difference in souls.' The priest replies, 'Oh that is in theory only for householders; when I go into a forest, then I will look at everyone the same.'¹⁴⁴ For Vivekananda, if it is true in the forests and for the sannyasin, then it is equally true for the householder in the city.

¹⁴⁴ *CWSV* 1:427, 'Vedanta and Privilege,' (London, December 1896).

Sevā offers a means to dispel ignorance not just at the individual and spiritual level, but at the communal and social level as well. It is a practice that can be undertaken by all regardless of their qualification (*adhikāra*) or religious affiliation (its synthetic aspect). It is a practice that operates at the social level as one necessarily requires persons to be served for sevā to be performed. And it is a religious practice—‘service as worship’—that directly challenges the social practices of privilege and prejudice that had become so entrenched in Indian society that they were nearly indistinguishable from religion.

Sevā challenges these social ills at two levels. At the first level, being a servant to the masses, seeing the Lord present in the poor, realizing the true non-difference between all beings, are all powerful correctives to privilege and prejudice. At a second level, Vivekananda fully embraced Ramakrishna’s teaching that ‘an empty stomach is no good for religion.’ Until the most basic needs of the population are met programs of spiritual renewal are fruitless endeavors. Just as sevā prepares its subject for spiritual realization, it readies and enables its object to begin his or her spiritual studies. In his most emboldened and inspired moments, Vivekananda envisioned the exponential possibilities of sevā. A handful of like-minded sannyasins committed to service could catalyze a movement that would sweep an entire nation, even an entire world.

During his 1897 return tour through India, Vivekananda laid out his hopes for his country, and in doing so he also voiced his criticisms against the pernicious practices of privilege and prejudice both of which he connected to caste. In ‘Vedanta and Indian Life’ he states, ‘wherever you go, there will be caste. But that does not mean that there should be these privileges. They should be knocked on the head...and that is what we want, no

privilege for any one, equal chances for all; let everyone be taught that the divine is within.’¹⁴⁵ Although he does not define privilege during his tour of India, he does so in two lectures delivered in London just before his return. In ‘Vedanta and Privilege’ he states:

The idea of privilege is the bane of human life. Two forces, as it were, are constantly at work, one making caste, and the other breaking caste’ in other words, the one making for privilege, the other breaking down privilege. And whenever privilege is broken down, more and more light and progress come to a race.¹⁴⁶

At this moment in his public career, Vivekananda is becoming a more outspoken Vedantin and so advaitin.¹⁴⁷ In both this lecture and the second titled simply ‘Privilege’ he juxtaposes the maintenance of privilege against the truths of a Vedānta made practical. Vivekananda does not deny the observable reality of difference. Some people are stronger than others, richer than others, and/or smarter than others. However, he denies the ultimate reality of difference. He states, ‘all beings, great or small, are equally manifestations of God; the difference is only in the manifestation.’¹⁴⁸ Ultimately and truly there is unity at the level of the soul, and the practice of privilege subverts this truth in order to maintain prestige and power.

¹⁴⁵ *CWSV* 3: 245-6, “Vedanta and its Application to Indian Life,” 247. In ‘The Future of India’ delivered during a later leg of his tour, he states, ‘, ‘I regret that that in the modern times there is such dissension between the castes. This must stop, It is useless on both sides, especially on the side of the higher caste, the Brahmin, because the day for these exclusive privileges and claims is gone.’ *CWSV* 3: 297, ‘The Future of India,’ (India, 1897). For Vivekananda on the caste system see the introduction.

¹⁴⁶ *CWSV* 1:423, ‘Vedanta and Privilege,’ (London, December 1896). The language here is very reminiscent to that of turn of century Protestant Liberalism. In ‘Privilege’ he states, ‘Practically it is the same argument [against unity] which is urged by the Brahmins of India, when they want to uphold the divisions and castes, when they want to uphold privileges of a certain portion of a community, against everybody else.’ *CWSV* 1:431, “Privilege,” (London, December 1896).

¹⁴⁷ During his tour of India, he acknowledges this fact while saying also that he has no intention of being sectarian about it. ‘People get disgusted many times at my preaching Advaitism. I do not mean to preach Advaitism, or Dvaitism, or any *ism* in the world. The only *ism* that we require now is this wonderful idea of the soul, its eternal purity, and its eternal perfection.’ *CWSV* 3:242-3, ‘Vedanta and its Application to Indian Life.’

¹⁴⁸ *CWSV* 1:424, ‘Vedanta and Privilege.’

Against this popular notion of privilege, Vivekananda offers a different understanding. He states, ‘look upon every man, woman, and everyone as God. You cannot help anyone, you can only serve: serve the children of the Lord, serve the Lord Himself, if you have the privilege.’¹⁴⁹ If one possess those things that accompany privilege popularly understood—education, wealth, health—then one has the means to employ that privilege properly. This begins by reallocating material resources to the needy masses and concludes by opening up India’s cultural and spiritual treasury to the masses.¹⁵⁰ A common exhortation throughout his tour of India is to teach Vedānta to the masses, to allow them access to its truth. He states:

This is justice and reason as I understand it. Our poor people, these downtrodden masses of India, therefore, require to hear and to know what they really are. Ay, let every man and woman and child, without respect of caste or birth, weakness or strength, hear and learn that behind the strong and the weak, behind the high and the low, behind everyone, there is that Infinite Soul, assuring the infinite possibility and the infinite capacity of all to become great and good...Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you, do not deny him!¹⁵¹

Privilege popularly prevents the masses from realizing this truth, and it prevents those in positions of privilege from doing so as well. Difference, accepted either willfully or woefully, at the social level permeates into the spiritual. Privilege is one form in which ignorance is manifested. It is an internal valuation and validation of oneself over another. Prejudice is also a form of ignorance manifested. However, it is an external evaluation of another. As such, Vivekananda connects it to the external, ceremonial side of religion.

¹⁴⁹ *CWSV* 3: 246, ‘Vedanta and its Application to Indian Life.’

¹⁵⁰ *CWSV* 3: 297, ‘The Future of India.’

¹⁵¹ *CWSV* 3: 193, ‘The Mission of Vedanta,’ (Kumbakonam, 1897). See also *CWSV* 3:224, ‘My Plan of Campaign.’ Here Vivekananda introduces this exhortation with a description of the state of the masses. ‘For centuries people have been taught theories of degradation. They have been told they are nothing. They masses have been told all over that they are no human beings.’

Very similar to his critique of excessive ceremonial practices, Vivekananda criticizes prejudice especially in the form of ‘don’t-touchism.’ During a talk in Manamadura he states, ‘we are neither Vedantists, most of us now, nor Purānics, nor Tāntrics. We are just “Don’t-touchists” Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is in the cooking-pot, and our religion is “Don’t touch me, I am holy.”’¹⁵² ‘Don’t-touchism’ has become the de facto religion of India, replacing all other practices and spiritual paths—work, devotion, and knowledge. Like privilege, it creates and sustains a consciousness of difference that extends to the internal, eternal, and essential nature of persons. The impact that don’t-touchism, which is just Vivekananda’s neologism for untouchability, has on high-caste and non-dalit persons is clear in Vivekananda’s condemnation. It prohibits touch and proximity thus rendering service to those whom most need it as impossible as it is impermissible. It supports privilege, prevents access to social and spiritual resources, and has led India to lose its way—a colonized nation that has abandoned much of what made, makes, and will make it again great.

What places Vivekananda amongst the minority of his non-Dalit contemporaries is his acute awareness of the psycho-spiritual damage that caste and untouchability have upon Dalit persons. This awareness is certainly present in his call to awaken the masses to their true, divine nature, which aims to counter centuries of degradation and dehumanization. But this call can viewed as a general (applied universally) and abstract (philosophically) teaching. It does not necessarily speak about Dalit experience.

¹⁵² *CWSV* 3: 167, ‘Reply to Manamadura Address,’ (Manamadura, Tamil Nadu, 1897). This statement is recorded nearly word for word by a reporter present in Khetri at the end of 1897. *CWSV* 3: 437, ‘Vedantism,’ (Khetri, 12.20.1897). Don’t-touchism is one of Vivekananda’s favorite neologism that demonstrates his wit and his frustration. See also *CWSV* 7:486, ‘Epistle XXVI,’ (Swami Brahmananda, 1894), *CWSV* 6: 319, ‘Epistle LXXXI,’ (Rakhal, 1895), *CWSV* 7:108, ‘Conversations and Dialogues I,’ (Belur Math, 1898), *CWSV* 7:246, ‘Conversations and Dialogues XXIV,’ (Belur Math, 1902).

Vivekananda had some familiarity with caste stigmatization. He was criticized for being a Śūdra-cum-sannyasin given of his *Kayastha* jāti, and he was considered an outcaste on account of his travels to the West. But his experiences are different from that of Dalit persons. Although he was caste conscious, jāti did not necessarily define his person nor restrict his actions. In order to get a true sense of the pervasiveness of these practices, he had to break them in the presence of those whom they affect and had to witness the discomfort that accompanies such violations. Not the discomfort experienced by other caste-persons, but the discomfort experienced by Dalit persons who have appropriated these stigmatizations and know the likely effects of broken caste rules.

One famous incident that Vivekananda shares with his disciples is an encounter that truly tested his commitment to monastic life and ‘whether [he had] gone beyond the prestige of caste and birth, etc.’¹⁵³ On the way to Vrindaban, he stopped and asked a man for a smoke. The man initially objects, saying, ‘Sire, I am a sweeper.’ Vivekananda recounts:

Well, there was the influence of old Samskaras, and immediately stepped back and resumed my journey without smoking. I had gone a short distance when the thought occurred to me that I was a Sannyasin, who had renounced caste, family, prestige, and everything—and still I drew back as soon as the man gave himself out as a sweeper, and could not smoke at the Chillum touched by him. The thought made me restless at heart; then I had walked on half a mile. Again I retraced my steps and came to the sweeper, whom I found still sitting there. I hastened to tell him, ‘Do prepare a Chillum of tobacco for me, my dear friend.’ I paid no heed to his objections and insisted on having it. So the man was compelled to prepare a Chillum for me.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ *CWSV* 7: 251, ‘Conversations and Dialogues XXV.’

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* This conversation directly follows another famous incident in which Vivekananda prepared a meal for the Santal workers at the Math, who while enjoying the company of Vivekananda were concerned that they would be punished for not finishing their work as Vivekananda conversed with them. Along with promising that no such punishment would occur, he prepared for them a meal in accordance to their dietary restrictions—food prepared without salt. Upon serving them, Vivekananda said, ‘You are Nārāyanas, God manifest; today I have offered food to Narayan.’ The disciple adds, ‘The service of “Daridra Narayana”—God in the poor—which Swamji spoke, he himself performed one day like this.’ *CWSV* 7:245, ‘Conversations and Dialogues XXIV.’

While the Vivekananda's self-correction is interesting, more important is the response of the sweeper who feels required to reveal his sweeper status.¹⁵⁵ He can never not be a sweeper. It is an identity that defines his person and circumscribes his actions. It is done so not just externally by other persons applying this identity to him, but internally by him himself.

When Vivekananda speaks about the problems of caste prejudice and untouchability, he acknowledges the obstacle it presents to persons with caste identities. Like Śaṅkara, Vivekananda realized that even for a sannyasin, caste mentality can still negatively influence one's actions. More than this recognition, he demonstrates the effects of caste mentality on persons from low-caste and Dalit communities. It has real social repercussions, but it is not simply a social problem; it has spiritual ramifications as well. Vivekananda states, 'our masses have been hypnotized for ages into that state. To touch them is pollution, to sit with them is pollution! Hopeless they were born, hopeless they must remain! And the result is that they have been sinking, sinking, sinking, and have come to the last stage to which being a human being can come.'¹⁵⁶ Having been told all his life that he is a sweeper, he appropriates that identity externally and internally.

Undergirding the practice of sevā is a judgment on humanity's nature that challenges privilege and prejudice. For those who benefit from and support these practices, it is a call to see beyond the accidental distinctions of caste and class and to recognize the essential non-difference between all beings. Against the pride that accompanies these practices, sevā demands humility to the point that one becomes the

¹⁵⁵ See also Vivekananda's reference to the shoemaker and Brahmin. *CWSV* 7: 185, 'Conversations and Dialogues IX,' (Belur Math, 1898). In this instance as well as the others, these stories and examples follow upon teaching on sevā.

¹⁵⁶ *CWSV* 3:429, 'The Vedanta,' (Lahore, 11.12.1897).

servants of servants. For those that suffer under caste oppression, it is a challenge to realize their own non-difference with the divine. It is one thing to be told that one possesses this identity, it is quite another to be treated and served in accordance with it. Sevā gradually awakens its recipient to this truth. It provides also the material and psycho-spiritual support needed to bring about its realization. It does not replace study, but it does offer a firm, supporting ground for it to commence.

What then is Vivekananda's liberative social vision? Certainly an India—and a world—free of prejudice and privilege would be a solid start. As would a nation of committed *sevakas* comprised of sannyasins and householders, men and women working for the material and spiritual uplift of the masses. However, these are all means that lead to his social vision becoming real. Vivekananda speaks of India becoming a nation of Brahmins, understood in his qualitative, ethical-character view of caste as persons whose *sattvic* nature has become fully actualized.¹⁵⁷ It will become a nation of Rishis peopled by sages who proclaim and live the highest truths of Vedānta. He states, 'they had hundreds of Rishis in ancient India. We will have millions—we are going to have, and the sooner every one of you believes in this, the better for India and the better for the world. Whatever you believe, that you will be tomorrow.'¹⁵⁸

Vivekananda's clarion call throughout his tour was 'arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached.'¹⁵⁹ It is a reworking of verse 1.3.14 in the *Kaṭa Upaniṣad*.¹⁵⁹ The goal in the Upanishad is spiritual realization, and Vivekananda maintains this component. But he also adds to it a new social dimension. To be a liberated person in the spiritual sense, one

¹⁵⁷ *CWSV* 3:294-6, 'The Future of India.'

¹⁵⁸ *CWSV* 3: 284, 'The Work before Us.'

¹⁵⁹ The Sanskrit is 'uttiṣṭhata jāgrata prāpya varān nibodhata.' Vivekananda keeps the first portion of the verse, but substitutes 'having reached great [teachers], learn' with 'stop not till the goal is reached.'

must be a liberated person in the social sense as well. One cannot achieve the former without the latter nor can one achieve true liberation in a non-liberated world.¹⁶⁰ This unified liberative vision has become enshrined in the official motto of the Ramakrishna Movement: ‘*ātmano mokshārtham, jagat hitaya ca*’ (For one’s liberation and for the world’s wellbeing). The aspirant for liberation must also work for the world’s benefit.

Conclusion

This chapter began by presenting the many influences and experiences that contributed to Vivekananda’s development of *jīva sevā* as practice that leads to the advaitic experience of non-difference. In these earliest days, as the idea remained inchoate, Vivekananda recognized the need for a program and practice that could alleviate the material and spiritual suffering of the Indian masses. Through his wanderings across India he encountered this double poverty, and at the southern most reaches of the subcontinent hit upon a plan that would blossom into the mission of Ramakrishna Community. As these earliest influences upon Vivekananda were diverse, including the Social Gospel Movement in the United states, *sevā* developed as an innovation that remained grounded in Sri Ramakrishna’s teachings and example.

The idea of service (devotion, worship) offered to the masses rather than compassion emerged over series of correspondences among Vivekananda and various members of the Ramakrishna Community between 1893 and the end of 1894. Here,

¹⁶⁰ To a disciple Vivekananda states, ‘what is the good of that spiritual practice or realization which does not benefit others, does not conduce the well-being of people sunk in ignorance and delusion, does not help in rescuing them from the clutches of lust and wealth? Do you think, so long as one Jiva endures bondage, you will have any liberation? So long as he is not liberated—it may take several lifetimes—you will have to be born to help him, to make him realize Brahman.’ *CWSV* 7: 235, ‘Conversations and Dialogues XXI,’ (Belur Math, 1901).

Vivekananda was reflecting upon and reworking an understanding of sevā and compassion that had its framework in the Vaiṣṇava practice, especially the service that a devotee renders to other Vaiṣṇava devotees. Vivekananda expanded the object of this service to include now all persons. He made this shift on account of advaitic anthropology that recognizes non-difference between God (Brahman) and the one served. All persons are thus appropriate objects of service.

The chapter proceeded to an examination of seva as a practice that is able to lead one to his or her own advaitic experience of non-difference. Here Vivekananda reworked the Upaniṣadic practice of hearing, thinking/reasoning, and meditating into a practice in which the skilled practice of exegesis is replaced by sevā. Service results in the gradual realization of the advaitic truth present in the Upaniṣads as the non-difference recognized in the other becomes recognized through the other and in one's own self. The chapter concluded with the implications of Vivekananda's understanding, and is presented in Dalit theology's language of identity affirmation and a liberative social vision.

Vivekananda envisioned the spiritual uplift of all of India to result in the material uplift of the masses. As privilege and prejudice are predicated on the experience of difference, as it vanishes so do they. In this way, identity affirmation—the realization of non-difference—and a liberative social vision—an India without privilege and prejudice—mutually support one another and lead each other on to higher levels realization and actualization.

Chapter Five

Dalit Liberative Service and Swami Vivekananda's Sevā:

A Comparative Theological Reflection

Introduction

This chapter constitutes the comparative turn in the project. It consists of two primary sections. The first revisits and expands upon pressing questions that Dalit theology faces in the 21st century. Simply, these question can be separated into two categories: questions concerning the Dalit-Self and questions concerning the non-Dalit Other. The first begins by unpacking the Modern Dalit Movement's influence upon Dalit theology, positively and problematically, especially as it relates to Dalit identity and Methodological Exclusivism. In these sections I also introduce the idea of strategic essentialism, highlighting some of the possibilities and limitations that accompany a paradoxically unfixed, fixed identity. The section concludes with a reflection on Dalit theology's self-understanding as a counter-theology and the impact it has upon forming liberative partnerships. The first section addresses many of the potential hindrances to a comparative theological project performed by a non-Dalit and in conversation with a Hindu thinker.

The second half of the chapter constitutes the comparative reflection. My focus here is on the ambiguous place service holds within Dalit theology today. The project then constructs an understanding of liberative service that brings into conversation and reflection Swami Vivekananda's understanding of sevā. Each subsection follows the same pattern: the presentation of a problem, Vivekananda's analogous example, a

synthetic construction, and a comparative reflection—a showing of the methodological hand. These sections include the ambiguity of service, Dalit identity, and epistemology and praxis. It concludes with an idea of liberative service that is able to respond to the concerns of present-day Dalit theologians.

Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century

As stated in the second chapter, Dalit theology has arrived at a critical crossroads in its development. While acknowledging the immense contributions offered by the preceding generation of theologians in establishing it as a necessary discipline for doing theology in India, the present generation has recognized also the need for it to continue to develop in response to its present context. Much has changed in India and in the world since Dalit theology was first formulated three decades ago. In order for Dalit theology to remain relevant and prophetic, contextual and critical, it needs to offer a response to the contemporary experiences of Dalit persons and communities. The present generation of Dalit theologians has begun to reassess some of the theology's foundational concerns: identity, liberative social vision, praxis, and methodological exclusivism. This evaluation aims neither to diminish early Dalit theology's accomplishments nor necessarily to discard previous practices. Instead it seeks to continue to push Dalit theology forward into the future with the hope that its twin objectives—identity affirmation and societal transformation—will soon be realized.

In thirty years Dalit discourse and theology has witnessed and contributed to significant extra- and intra-ecclesial changes. Outside the church and at the socio-economic level, globalization, technology, communication, and migration have changed

the rural landscape and urban cityscape. Once a nation all but closed off economically from the world after colonial rule, India has experienced steady and staggering economic growth. According to IMF data, India ranked 10th with a GDP of 764 billion in 1990. The IMF projects India's GDP to be 5.75 trillion in 2015—third in the world trailing only the United States and China.¹ Despite this growth, the World Bank reports that in 2010 29.8% of the population fell below the international poverty line—\$1 .25 (US)—and 68.7% live on less than \$2.00 (US).² The data captures a country in the liminal space between developed and underdeveloped—often labeled simply and vaguely as ‘developing.’ The majority of the Dalit community remains in that second space.

Socially, reservations—still yet to be secured for Dalit Christian and Muslim communities—have created educational and employment opportunities previously unattainable by Dalits as well as new sites for caste-based discrimination.³ At the political level, the communal nature of Dalit-block voting has lead both the Indian National Congress and the Bharata Janata Party to court Dalit votes in order to assemble coalitions capable of carrying contested districts. However, such politicking has at times exacerbated intra-Dalit relations as Dalit communities compete with one another to gain favor.⁴ Moreover, the new political partnerships in India belie the presence of old patterns

¹ <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2012/02/weodata/download.aspx>

² <http://data.worldbank.org/country/india>

³ Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock reference the recent film *India Untouched*, which examines in part the impact that globalization, has had on caste-discrimination. The film introduces the concept ‘high-tech discrimination’ as a new locus for casteism experienced by young Dalit professionals attempting to secure employment in the lucrative and burgeoning IT sectors. Clarke, Manchala, Peacock, ‘Introduction,’ *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 11.

⁴ Here the broad *bahujan* (majority people, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Castes) consensus, as envisioned by Ambedkar, breaks down as particular SC, ST, and OBC groups compete to be competed for. Regarding this dynamic's effect upon Dalit theology, Peniel Rajkumar states, ‘Dalit theologians, more often than not, have exhibited a tendency to focus on identity of the Dalits only as “victims of the caste-system.” They have maintained relative oblivion to the aspect of Dalits as “oppressors,” within the reality of intra-Dalit hierarchy. Internal Dalit hierarchy and divisions between Dalits have often been critiqued by Dalit theologians, not on the basis of their “ontological wrongness”

of social persecution. Crimes against Dalit persons persist, as does communal violence that targets especially Dalit convert communities.⁵

The last three decades have affected likewise the Indian theological landscape. Since A. P. Nirmal, one the founding figures of Dalit theology, issued his clarion call for an Indian theology from India's underside, Dalit theology gradually has become a recognized and proper mode for theological reflection. Clarke, Peacock, and Deenabandhu Manchala, editors of the volume *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, describe this transformation. They state:

While earlier Dalit theology was in dialogue with what, at the time, could be considered mainstream theology, today's theologians have the opportunity, the privilege even, of being spokespersons of an acceptable mode of theological enquiry, not only within the context of India but also internationally.⁶

Though it cannot yet be called mainstream theology, the course it charts clearly serves as a major tributary. And here lies the rub for 21st century Dalit theology. How does a counter-theology transition into a mainstream one, a reactive theology into a proactive one, a deconstructive theology into a constructive one?⁷

One sees the tension inherent in the language that frames the question. Dalit theology is in a privileged position having been deemed now an acceptable, proper, and even necessary mode of theological reflection. Without doubt, this achievement is

(which definitively characterizes Dalit critique of the caste-system), but on the basis of their functional demerits, i.e. on the basis that such intra-Dalit divisions thwart Dalit solidarity and the possibility of a "unified" Dalit front, which is a strong resource for Dalit struggles.' Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 170.

⁵ Between 1995-2011 4.7 million reported and recorded atrocities were committed against Dalit persons. Mahim Pratap Singh, 'Untouched by Justice,' *The Hindu*, January 25, 2013.

⁶ Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock, 'Introduction,' 11.

⁷ Ibid. Counter, reactive, and deconstructive are all adjectives that Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock use to describe early Dalit theology. It counters mainstream Indian Christian theology by centering itself on the experiences of Dalit persons rather than high-caste persons. It reacts to the agenda and criteria established by Indian Christian theology. It deconstructs an upper-caste understanding of the world. These types of questions are not unique to Dalit Christian theology, and are parallel to changes in the West where feminist theologies, liberation theologies, etc. are competing well with what used to be mainstream

immeasurably indebted to that first generation. However, these theologians were not the gatekeepers, but instead those wishing to pass/crash through the gates. To accomplish their goals—identity affirmation and societal transformation—Dalit theologians necessarily had to secure their place at the table. They have done this, and the present generation is ‘now in a position to set the agenda.’⁸ The success of this agenda depends upon Dalit theology’s ability to transition into this new Indian theological context, one that it transformed and continues to transform.

Given the emergence of new possibilities and the lingering of old problems, the present mood in both the broader Dalit discourse and in Dalit theology is an optimism tempered by realism. The struggle remains an uphill one, but it is not Sisyphean. Nevertheless, the anxiousness that accompanies a two-steps forward, one-step back advancement is palpable. It is born from the recognition that much has been achieved, the realization that much still remains unachieved, and the awareness that progress is not inevitable. Romanticism gives way to realism as at once aspirations are actualized and dreams deferred.⁹

This new context has led the present generation of Dalit theologians to rethink the method necessary for advancing the theology forward. From its very beginning Dalit theology has been a theology informed by Dalit persons and communities’ experiences. As these experiences change so do the grounds for reflection and enquiry. The goal,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ By romanticism I do not mean to suggest that either the modern Maharashtra Dalit Movement nor Dalit Christian theology were ever unmoored from the realities of Dalit experience, but rather that the early sentiment of both understandably was a nothing-to-lose, us-against-them attitude that buoyed their efforts through the first generation. Presently there is something to lose or perhaps somethings. That first being all that has been gained thus far; the second being the very soul of the movement. Can the necessary changes be made to the movement and to the theology that allows for the push towards Dalit liberation to continue without compromising the project and its desired end? This question is not a first generation question nor could it be, but one for the present and subsequent generations to answer.

however, remains the same. As Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock state, ‘What joins this new generation of Dalit theologians together with those who articulated Dalit theology earlier is not a commonality of experience, but rather a commonality of commitment to overcome, to root out, and even annihilate the discriminatory caste system.’¹⁰

In the Beginning: Dalit Theology and the Modern Dalit Movement

The project undertaken by the first generation of Dalit theologians can be described as radically ambitious on all fronts. Within the Church it sought the systematic overhaul of how Indian Christian theology had been done for more than a century. Within society it sought to overthrow social practices that had been established for millennia. That these have not been achieved within thirty years is not surprising. If pressed, even the most optimistic Dalit theologians could not have expected such an immediate transformation. However, what the first generation did accomplish was to move a novel, politically difficult, prophetically challenging theology from the margins into the center. It did so through a sheer force of will—an unwillingness to be silenced and an unwillingness to remain unheard. Moreover, it did so by following a determined program that allowed Dalit theology to develop independently—and apart—from traditional Indian Christian theology.

The decisions made in the construction of Dalit theology proved conducive in creating a viable theological discipline. Without question, its formation addressed a lacuna in Indian Christian theology and likewise an absent, but needed ministry in the Church. It sufficiently met a demand that until then theologians had not recognized. Still, there was nothing inevitable about its establishment as this generation undertook the task

¹⁰ Clarke et al., ‘Introduction,’ 11.

of simultaneously creating a new theology nearly from scratch while having to justify its necessity and method every step of the way.¹¹ The initial spark could have petered out—a flash in the theological pan. It could have been contained and tempered by dominant/dominating traditions—blunting much of its critique in the name of propriety and civility. Without care and discipline it could have burnt bright and hot like the Dalit Panthers only then to consume itself. It is a testament to that first generation of Dalit theologians that they were able to stoke a flame from that little bit of original kindling.

The initial ad hoc approach gave way to a more precise program as Nirmal and his contemporaries shaped the contours of Dalit theology by emphasizing Dalit identity and advocating for a methodological exclusivism. They engaged the Gospel through the particular lens of Dalit pathos seeking to recover and expound upon the Good News offered to an oppressed people. Soon thereafter Dalit theology emerged as a legitimate counter-theology that challenged existing modes of Indian theology to acknowledge the often-unacknowledged casteism operative in the Church. The insistence, if not always enforced, on methodological exclusivism further ensured that Dalit theology would be about Dalits, for Dalits, and by Dalits.¹²

The near single-minded focus on identity in the beginning is justifiable. Dalit theology would be unintelligible and insignificant, without referent, if it did not articulate the particularity of its being Dalit. However, it is important to note again that in its earliest stages Dalit theology was not ‘Dalit theology,’ but rather ‘Shudra theology.’¹³

¹¹ Here again Dalit theology is not so unique. One would be hard-pressed to find any theology in any century, but especially in the 20th, that did not have to justify its purpose and method. Nevertheless, its establishment, like other theologies, was not guaranteed.

¹² Nirmal, ‘Towards a Dalit Christian Theology,’ 214.

¹³ The title of Nirmal’s Carey Address at UTC in Bangalore, the Ur-text of Dalit theology, was ‘Towards a Shudra Theology.’ And before Shudra theology there were Peoples Theology and Indian Liberation Theology.

The general aims of both theologies were similar—the necessity for Indian Christian theology to engage the realities of the lowest castes and to contribute to their liberation—but the ‘Dalitness’ of the theology did not become prominent until the later discovery and appropriation of the Modern Maharashtran Dalit movement’s ideological framework. The first generation, in its own efforts at inculturation, translated an existing and developed Dalit discourse into a Christian grammar and vocabulary. During this period one sees the gestation of an idea and the maturation of a theology.

In their encounter with the modern Dalit movement, these theologians underwent the kind of conscientization the movement sought to instill. Dalit discourse provided a means to understand the problem and persistence of caste stigmatization and low/outcaste economic exploitation. Moreover, it provided a new identity, forged from experience and aspiration, that countered and soon supplanted identities forced upon and acquiesced to by Dalit communities. They were now longer untouchables, outcastes, or *harijans*, but instead Dalits, authors of their own destiny and creators of a new India. And in the case of Dalit theology, they were now the authors and subjects of their own theology.

What it meant to be Dalit, to be a Dalit theologian, and to do Dalit theology, occupied the first generation because these were novel and necessary questions. The discovery of Dalitness—Dalit identity—by Dalit theologians coincided with the creation of Dalit theology. That is Dalit theologians were coming to understand what it meant to be Dalit as they were coming to understand what it meant to be doing Dalit theology as a Dalit Christian. This process of mutual unfolding consisted of affirmation and negation, construction and deconstruction. Crucially, Dalitness affirmed the humanity and dignity of Dalit persons in the very construction of this identity. Critically, Dalitness negated

caste identities and stigmatization in the deconstruction of casteist ideologies. The positive turn in Dalit discourse looked to the past, lost or forgotten, to form a present identity capable of creating a liberated future. The negative turn followed a similar historical trajectory, but did so by rejecting past oppression and attempting to dismantle its present, structural forms so as to ensure their absence in the future.

Throughout the entire modern Dalit movement, from Phule to the Panthers, Dalit identity was fashioned in this dual manner. Although more explicit in the deconstructive turn, from the very beginning it was an identity in and of opposition. In opposition, the Dalit movement rejected and replaced the dominant religio-cultural understandings with what the movement understood to be a more authentic representative identity. Here their formulation would be, 'we are not who they say we are, we are who we know we are.' Of opposition, they reversed but nevertheless maintained the division present in the Indian social system. If high caste Indians would say, 'they are not like us,' the Dalit movement would reply, 'yes, we are not like them.' What the movement changes here is both the qualification of difference (from outcaste/high-caste to oppressed/oppressor and Dalit/Brahmin) and the agency of differentiation (from object to subject). The constructive turn humanizes Dalit persons by positing their dignity and asserting their agency, what Nirmal sees as the movement from no-persons to persons. The deconstructive turn confronts the casteist ideology that perpetuates Dalit dehumanization.

As creative as the Dalit movement was in signifying Dalit identity it remained entangled in the old grammars of division. There remained an 'us' and a 'them,' but only now the poles had been reversed: the Dalits became the 'us,' non-Dalits/'Brahmins' the

‘them.’¹⁴ Given the context the resulting binarism was certainly understandable, most probably unavoidable, and for many Dalit groups like the Panthers unproblematic. The construction of a counter identity required something with which to be countered. Pre-‘Dalit’ identities offered an internal juxtaposition, but these identities also pointed to an external, ideological system that supported such identities in the first place. Despite acknowledging casteist ideology’s systemic structural nature, or because of it, the movement reasoned that the structure ultimately had to be established and supported by a ‘someone’ or ‘someones.’ Because caste was understood to be primarily a religio-social form of oppression and only secondarily economical and political, the movement perceived Brahminic Hindus, to be the group with the most vested interest in its maintenance.¹⁵

¹⁴ I place quotation marks around Brahmins because for Dalit discourse the category cannot simply be reduced to those in the Brahmin *varṇa* and includes all those that support Brahminic Hinduism—itsself a rather vague category, but understood to be centered especially on purity/pollution and the necessity of caste. Omvedt presents Brahminism to be interchangeable with casteism. Gail Omvedt, ‘Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India,’ *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, Vol. 2, ed. Ghanshyam Shah (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001).

Wilfred offers a concise definition that seems to capture a general, working conception of the term. He states, ‘Brahmanism as an ideology supports an assimilationist view of identities, while it has no difficulty in maintaining a hierarchically ordered society according to principles of purity and pollution.’ Quoted in Francis X. Clooney, S.J., ‘Reengaging the Classical Traditions in the Light of Popular and Subaltern Hinduism: Extending Felix Wilfred’s Reconsideration of Hindu-Christian Relations,’ in *Negotiating Border: Theological Explorations in the Global Era. Essays in Honour of Prof Felix Wilfred*, edited by Patrick Gnanapragasm (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2008): 419.

¹⁵ The Indian Constitution also recognizes caste to be first a religious question. Article 341 grants the President of India the authority ‘to specify the castes, races or tribes or parts of groups within castes, races, or tribes which for the purposes of this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Caste.’ The designation Scheduled Caste comes with discriminatory protection and reservations in work and education. Invoking Article 341, the Presidential Order of 1950 states in paragraph 3, ‘no person who professes a faith different from Hindu shall be deemed a member of Scheduled Caste.’ While critics of the Order view this as a violation of Article 15 of the Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, and a constitutional means to deter conversion, the presupposition of the Order is that caste affects only those who profess a faith in which caste is operative, i.e. Hindu. The logic behind that order is that non-Hindu Dalit persons do not suffer caste stigmatization as they are now without caste. Here caste is construed as religious question not a political, economical, or even broadly social one. An amendment to the Order in 1956 granted Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Sikhs and one in 1990—the centenary of Ambedkar’s birth—granted the designation to Dalit Buddhists. Dalit Muslims and Christians, whose religions like Sikhism and Buddhism do not possess caste, have yet to achieve such recognition. Both the National Council of Churches in India (an ecumenical organization that includes the Protestant and

From its advent the movement recognized that it was countering a worldview, Brahminism, that shaped social relationships materially and psychologically, was manifested culturally and economically in practices and institutions, and was experienced in the minds and bodies of persons who were informed by it.¹⁶ The central place that conscientization holds in its thinking demonstrates an awareness that this episteme operates initially and predominantly at an unconscious level. The Dalit movement focused its attention and efforts on addressing the particular multidimensional impact this worldview had on Dalit persons. However, it did not extend its critical investigation into Brahminism's impact upon non-Dalit persons.¹⁷ It is clear that non-Dalits too are entangled in the same ideological system. Their experiences in it and of it are different, but casteist ideology nevertheless deeply directs their way of being and relating to the world. Both Dalits and upper castes share versions of casteist ideology.

Orthodox Churches of India) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India are working to extend reservations to all Dalit Persons. Although this is the majority position amongst the Indian Christian Churches, the Poor Christian Liberation Movement (PCLM) has argued extensively against these efforts, noting that it is the responsibility of the Churches and not the government to see to the needs of its Dalit parishioners. However, Rowena Robinson speculates that the PCLM is a pawn of the BJP, as its head R. L. Francis is a contributor to Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)—a Hindu nationalist organization and the social arm of the BJP—sponsored publications. Although the PCLM is correct that the churches should be accountable and work to meet Dalit needs, caste cannot be confined merely to the realm of religion as it is also a social phenomenon, and so it cannot be addressed merely by appealing to Christian Charity. Rowena Robinson, *Christians of India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), 193.

¹⁶ See Kancha Ilaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict in History,' in *Dalit Identity and Politics*. As the title suggests, Ilaiah juxtaposes Dalitism with Brahmanism and offers a developed, if also radical, critique of 'Brahmanism' as an ideology.

See also M C Raj, *Dalit Think: An Adventure into Dalit Philosophy* (Tumkur, Karnataka: Ambedkar Resource Center, 2006), especially 'Cultural Trajectory of Brahmanism, 324-9. M. C. Raj identifies nearly twenty dimensions that 'may constitute largely the trajectory that Brahmanism has traversed in the name of culture.' These include: Heavy influx of heavenward looking worldview as against the earthward and under the earthward looking culture of the Dalit people, establishing a caste based social organization of the country thus introducing new governance based on graded inequality, and imposed untouchability as religious dogma within the parameters of karma and dharma.

¹⁷ The immediacy of the Dalit predicament and the newness of the discourse makes this lacuna understandable. That said, to continue to ignore the ideology's broader manifestations in the general public risks presenting a chart of symptoms without every being able to diagnose the disease.

In this way, most persons, if not all, are objects to ideology—even those who consciously support it. This statement does not mean to suggest that though one is an object to ideology he or she is not also a subject—one who possesses agency and its attendants: responsibility, culpability (when applicable), and most importantly freedom. To do so would be an injustice to those who experience its effects in a disproportionately negative, oppressive, and abusive way. Moreover, to do so would result in a fatalism rendering moot from the beginning any acts of protest and liberation. But it does mean to claim that ideology, when unchecked, can be violently totalizing and dehumanizing for all who undergo formation under it and by it. It obscures reality by claiming to be reality—the way things were, are, and will ever be.

That the present generation of Dalit thinkers has acknowledged the ways in which Dalit communities themselves have appropriated caste hierarchy and employed it in intra-Dalit relations reveals the ideology's pervasiveness.¹⁸ This awareness complicates the simple, static binarism of Dalit/oppressed and Brahmin/oppressor by recognizing that such categories are more porous and complex than one might initially suspect. It also complicates both individual binaries in the system. In the constructive process that resulted in the Dalit identity's formation, Brahminic identity never enjoyed the same

¹⁸ N. Sudhakar Rao states, 'The problem of hierarchy in the untouchable castes throughout India has long been noticed by various investigators. Even British records in the 18th century mention that the two prominent untouchable castes in south India—leather workers and non-leather workers—have never agreed upon their hierarchical position.' N. Sudhakar Rao, 'The Structures of South Indian Untouchable Castes,' in *Dalit Identity Politics*, 82. Rao has documented the conflict between Malas and Madigas, Dalit groups in Andhra Pradesh, as each group asserts their higher place in society. Here he offers a critique of Moffat and Dumont's understanding of how caste ideology operates by focusing on the interplay of economics and politics rather than simply religion. Interestingly, building upon Raheja's study of the Gujar *jāti*, he notes that in this instance it is the non-Brahmin Gujar caste that sits atop the social hierarchy in which other caste groups including Brahmins offer services to them. Rank here is conferred economically and politically, and especially by proximity (service) to those that have more of it, and not ritually or religiously. However, stigmatization, especially for those on the lower rungs, still remains. No *jāti* wants to be on the bottom, and so each employs its own apologetic and polemic to justify, primarily to itself, its higher social location. Rao does well to show caste consciousness' complexity and that reducing hierarchy to notions of purity and pollution alone is problematic.

attentiveness. As it served as a foil for juxtaposition and a target for dissent and deconstruction, it functioned also as a placeholder signifying the oppressive elements of casteist ideology. Over the course of Dalit discourse's development, Dalitness came to be embodied in a distinct group: Dalit persons. Likewise Brahminism became embodied in Brahminic persons. With Brahminic ideology becoming an identity and subsequently a people the transference of Dalit protest followed. The rejection of high-caste ideology became the rejection of high-caste persons as identified and defined by Dalit discourse. Depending on one's objectives—how liberation is conceived—this too may not necessarily be problematic.¹⁹ However, for Dalit Christians, who seek to synthesize Dalit discourse with Christian theology, it is.

Rethinking Dalit Theology in and for the Twenty-first Century: Identity and Exclusivism

In light of the Dalit theology's appropriation of modern Dalit discourse, Gail Omvedt's lament for the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement, embodied aesthetically in the Dalit literary movement and politically in the Dalit Panthers, is pertinent to its own future. She states:

It was clear by 1998 that it is not enough to say that 'We must become a ruling community,' a political movement has to have a broad agenda and vision of transformation and development; it has to say why it should rule and what it has to offer. To go back to the comparison with Marxism, the 'proletariat vanguard' was presumed to be qualified because it promised socialism—equality and development, and advance of productive forces—to all sections of society. What do Dalits promise, besides reservations and claim to equality or a warmed over

¹⁹ Recall the *Dalit Panther Manifesto* (1973): We do not want a little place in the Brahman Alley. We want to rule of the whole country. Change of heart, liberal education will not end our state of exploitation. When we gather a revolutionary mass, rouse the people, out of struggle will come a tidal wave of revolution...To eradicate the injustice against Dalits, they themselves must become rulers. This is the people's democracy.

version of Marxism interpreted as state socialism? This has never been made clear in the post-Ambedkar era... The 'post-Ambedkar Dalit movement' was ironically only that in the end—a movement of Dalits, challenging some of the deepest aspects of oppression and exploitation, but failing to show the way to transformation.²⁰

Modern Dalit discourse presupposed that conscientization would naturally and inevitably result in societal transformation. As soon as a critical mass of Dalit persons—that is persons aware of their Dalitness—was achieved a revolution, democratic or otherwise, would soon follow. What the movement had failed to realize was that without an agenda—a robust vision for the future in which all Indians would flourish and a program to actualize it—critique of the present status quo would remain just a critique.

Omvedt's lament is that Phule and especially Ambedkar had guided the movement to a point in which transformation could be achieved, and yet in 1998, when Omvedt wrote the essay, and still today, it has yet to happen. While a critical examination of why this is will reveal the ways in which casteist ideology continues to work to stymie Dalit liberation, it will also reveal the ways in which Dalit discourse has contributed to its own stumbling. No matter how intricate in detail, a map to arrive at the meeting place is not a map to the final destination. Effective and necessary means for mobilization may not be the most effective ultimately for securing liberation. This very well may be Dalit theology's predicament as well evidenced by the present generation's evaluation of its first few decades.

The methodological decisions that Dalit theology made in its first generation allowed it to become a recognized, legitimate mode of theological inquiry that had to be reckoned with and accounted for. In emphasizing the very Dalitness of its project it

²⁰ Gail Omvedt, 'Ambedkar and After: The Dalit Movement in India,' in *Dalit Identity and Politics*, 156-7.

provided a space for the Dalit community, the majority in the Indian Christian Church, to reflect upon their lived experiences in light of the Gospel. Nirmal stresses the necessary centrality of Dalit identity in informing Dalit theology. He states:

In such a theological venture the primacy of the term ‘dalit’ will have to be conceded against the primacy of the term Christian in the dominant theological primary. What this means is that the non-dalit will ask us ‘What is Christian’ about Dalit theology? Our reply will have to be: ‘It is the Dalitness which is Christian’ about Dalit theology.²¹

In the margins of my copy of the text, which came from United Theological College in Bangalore, an astute commentator rightly notes that this is a ‘risky undertaking.’ The undertaking is to establish a hermeneutic in which the primary direction of interpretation goes from Dalit experience to theology. The risk comes in not being able to maintain the necessary tension in the interpretive process between context (experience) and content (revelation). The possibility for the former to subvert the latter is a risk inherent any theological endeavor. No matter how self-critical, no method is truly immune to it, and no theology is ultimately untouched by it. What appears to be a hermeneutical pickle—interpretation is always context dependent—can be checked by a hermeneutical humility—the content is never exhaustively contained by interpretation.

Dalit theology is not unique in granting methodological primacy to experience and context. Dalit theologian M. E. Prabhakar quotes James Cone to support this privileging of context. He quotes, ‘Although revelation of God may be universal and eternal, theological talk about that revelation is filtered through human experience, which is limited by social realities.’²² Prabhakar adds, ‘Like black theology, Christian dalit

²¹ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 59.

²² James Cones, ‘The Social Context of Theology,’ in *Social Action Groups and the Churches in India* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1984), 24. Quoted in Prabhakar, ‘The Search for a Dalit Theology,’ 44. Cone’s essay comes from a consultation to which he was invited to contribute and present at UTC.

theology should emerge through efforts to reinterpret God's liberating presence in a society that consistently denies them their humanity, socially ostracizes them, economically exploits them, and culturally subjugates them.'²³ Dalit theology as a reflection on revelation in light of experience, created a needed space for the community to voice their protest and their hopes. This would not have been possible without articulating what Dalit means experientially and theologically.

Having carved out a space for itself, Dalit theology sought to protect that space from the encroachment of the dominant/dominating tradition so that it could flourish freely. Here Nirmal and others advocated for a methodological exclusivism that would ensure that theological freedom. He states, 'this exclusivism is necessary because the tendency of all dominant tradition—cultural or theological—is to accommodate, include, assimilate, and finally conquer others.'²⁴ While Nirmal's account for methodological exclusivism's necessity centers on the active cooption/domestication by the dominant tradition, Clarke demonstrates how methodological exclusivism prevents also passive interference. He states, 'Methodological closures to blockade dominant worldviews are strategic openings to the particularities of subjugated Dalit resources. It creates important decolonized space that provides productive engenderment of Dalit theological reflection.'²⁵ As identity affirmation is essential to the success of Dalit theology, methodological exclusivism strategically excises space for those resources to be accessed unencumbered by the psychological and theological influence of the dominant tradition.

²³ Prabhakar, 'The Search for a Dalit Theology,' 44.

²⁴ Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 58.

²⁵ Sathianathan Clarke, 'Dalit Theology: An Introductory and Interpretive Theological exposition,' in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, 21.

Affirming Dalit identity, countering dominant ideologies, and calling for a methodological exclusivism were all necessary undertakings that allowed Dalit theology to survive its infancy and to arrive as a developed theological discipline. However, these very things that allowed Dalit theology to arrive are now being questioned by present Dalit theologians as to whether they allow it to thrive. Peniel Rajkumar, a leading voice amongst the present generation, is representative of the general critical assessment being conducted by second-generation Dalit theologians today. He presents the problem as a breakdown in the praxiological framework—‘the dialectic between the what (objective/s) and how (approach/es) of Dalit theology’—that drives the theology.²⁶ His conclusion is that there has been a failure to fully integrate the two poles, which prevents either from informing, sustaining, and critiquing the other. Furthermore, as this is a methodological issue its repercussions necessarily reverberate in the resultant theological content.

Rajkumar concludes:

There are certain issues in the theological articulation of Dalit theology which have the potential to curtail the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. Therefore, though the intended goals of Dalit theology are intensely practical (and hence ethical), its theological content deters effective engagement in social transformations.²⁷

His critical observation, but by no means his alone, questions the very efficacy and thus import of Dalit theology. What is Dalit theology if it cannot effect Dalit liberation?

Rajkumar’s critique of Dalit theology’s current capability to be truly and ultimately liberative echoes Omvedt’s regarding the post-Ambedkar Dalit movement. This should not be surprising given Dalit theology’s appropriation of Dalit discourse.

²⁶ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 43. Rajkumar identifies Dalit theology’s objectives to be identity affirmation and liberative social vision and its approaches to be ‘agency for liberation’ emphasizing Dalit agency and creating, maintaining liberative partnerships.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

Because Dalit discourse supplied much of the ideological content and guided much of the methodological styling, both its strengths and weaknesses became engrained in Dalit theology's program. Concerning the latter, two interrelated methodological decisions have become especially problematic for the theology's advancement: an essentialized understanding of Dalit identity and a strict methodological exclusivism. Both result from Dalit theology's emphasis on identity affirmation—what became the primary, but also necessary concern for first generation theologians—over societal transformation. Like the modern Dalit movement, there appears to be an operating presupposition on their part that identity affirmation would inevitably lead to transformation. That it has not yet, suggests Dalit theology could benefit from rethinking its means in light of its desired ends.

A key dynamism inherent to Dalit identity is that it simultaneously acknowledges the social and economic condition of Dalit persons while also rejecting it and working to overcome it. The Dalit *Sahitya* Movement selected the term because it means crushed and ground-down, but they then invested it with revolutionary and liberative potency. Similar to Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, the movement understood that in taking the name Dalit, Dalit persons were asserting their agency and standing in defiance to Brahminism. Dalit theology, in choosing to become 'Dalit' theology, did so recognizing Dalit's double meaning. As Nirmal states:

[Christian Dalit Theology] will be based on their own dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations and their own hope. It will narrate the story of their *pathos* and their protest against the socio-economic injustices they have been subjugated to throughout history. It will anticipate liberation which is meaningful to them.²⁸

²⁸ Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 58.

Dalit identity is filled with both pathos and protest. However, as Dalit theology developed the prominence of pathos ascended while protest became enfolded into it. That is protest increasingly became understood to be the articulation and then embrace of pathos, a precondition for liberation but not sufficient to achieving it. The danger lies in essentializing or ontologizing pathos so that it becomes the intrinsic quality of Dalit persons. Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock acknowledge the tendency in Dalit theology to revert to fixed identity in an effort to emphasize and maximize the particularity of Dalit *pathos* born from what they call a ‘preoccupation with identity politics.’²⁹ They state:

The backdrop of discovering and expressing the similarity and difference of the future of OUR world must be rethought. Broken and crushed identities cannot be mobilized or healed by presuming and posturing of a fixed, essential, enduring, and common Dalit identity...no longer do we construe ‘Dalit’ as a closely guided marker of either ontological or biological identity.³⁰

Dalit pathos even, or especially, in all its particularity is necessary for the construction of a Dalit theology that is both authentic to its context and is truly liberative. However, a purely pathos derived theology is theologically and anthropologically problematic. It risks preventing its ‘praxis-potential’ from being truly realized.

Such a pathos-centric theology is best captured in one of the two key Biblical paradigms that Dalit theologians reflected upon. Although second-generation theologians have problematized the Deuteronomic Creed rooted in the Exodus, most notably regarding Dalits’ participatory agency in their own liberation, the Suffering Servant paradigm relates most directly to pathos.³¹ Nirmal presents the Suffering Servant paradigm in the following:

²⁹ Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock, ‘Introduction,’ 12.

³⁰ Ibid., 12-3.

³¹ Rajkumar refers to these two paradigms as the ‘Victorization of God’ and the ‘Victimization of God’ respectively. He offers three critiques of the Deuteronomic Creed paradigm. The first presents

But the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and whom the prophets spoke is a Dalit God. He is a servant God—a God who serves. Services to others have always been the privilege of the dalit communities in India...Against this background [pathetic service] the amazing claim of a Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the dalits, the self-existent, the Svayambhu does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits...Are we prepared to say that my housemaid, my sweeper, my *bhang* is my God? It is precisely in this sense our God is a servant God. He is a waiter, a dhobi, a bhang. Traditionally, all such services have been the lot of dalits.³²

This Dalit conception of God is as Clarke notes ‘surely contextual.’³³ In becoming a Suffering Servant, God becomes incarnate, knowing the particular plight of Dalit persons—their servile status, painful occupations, and pain-filled daily experiences. For Clarke, this articulation bridges the gap between the transcendent and immanent, between ‘estranged Dalit communities and a remote God.’³⁴ In doing so it counters casteist notions of Dalit proximity and immediacy to the divine and disrupts concepts like purity and pollution. Rajkumar states, ‘Nirmal’s thesis that God is a servant god is meant to enhance and affirm the humanity of Dalits that through the services as scavengers and slaves they have participated in this “servant-God’s ministries.”’³⁵ Such an understanding is a powerful and needed confirmation that God in Jesus serves in solidarity with the Dalits, and that Dalits image God in their own performance of such services. It affirms

Clarke’s own critique, which notes that the paradigm projects a problematic hope in direct, divine intervention. Quoting Clarke, ‘In the Indian context it seems that the “mighty acts of God,” which deliver God’s chosen oppressed ones from the clutches of the oppressors, have either changed their aim or exhausted themselves.’ The second follows the Deuteronomic Creed to its end, the conquest of Canaan, which portrays God as being no different than what Kancha Ilaiah calls the ‘Hindu Brahmanic ‘weapon wielder Gods.’ Third, it has the potential to reinforce ‘us’ v. ‘them’ binaries that limit liberative partnerships. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 62-4.

³² Nirmal, ‘Towards a Dalit Christian Theology,’ 63-4.

Nirmal proceeds to link directly this understanding of God with the Suffering Servant passage from Isaiah concluding, ‘That is the language used to describe the servant language full of *pathos*. That is the language used for God the God of dalits. But that is also the language that mirrors our own pathos as dalits. The language that mirrors the God of dalits and dalits themselves. Incredible.’ Ibid., 65.

³³ Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exploration,’ 29.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Peniel Rajkumar, “How” Does the Bible Mean? The Bible and Dalit Liberation in India,’ *Political Theology* 11.3 (2010): 418.

the dignity of Dalits that God chose to become incarnate in this particular way. However, it does so by making what Rajkumar calls an ‘inordinate hermeneutical purchase.’³⁶

This again is an issue of protest’s place alongside pathos in the conception of Dalit identity. A Suffering Servant Christology may well reevaluate pathos by ascribing Dalitness to Christ and God’s nature.³⁷ However, Rajkumar rightly questions if such a Christology ultimately reinforces the status quo by ‘romanticizing Dalit servanthood,’ which is both the cause and effect of Dalit oppression.³⁸ Citing the work the Backward Classes Commission, he notes their recognition that the caste system conditions Dalit persons psychologically to the point of accepting ‘their socially-inscribed inferiority and subservience as being ontological.’³⁹ By essentializing this particular, and I think limited, understanding of Dalitness for Dalits and for God rather than confronting and denying (protest) this identity as a social construction (accidental), it makes pathos essential—‘irreducible, unchanging, and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing.’⁴⁰

Rajkumar, again, rightly questions the liberative potential of the Suffering Servant paradigm, which he sees as a ‘glorification of suffering and re-creation of Jesus in the

³⁶ Ibid, 417.

³⁷ M. E. Prabhakar states, ‘It is through us [Dalits] that God will manifest and display His Salvation. It is precisely in and through the weaker, the downtrodden, the crushed, the oppressed, and the marginalized that God’s saving glory is manifested or displayed. This is because brokenness belongs to the very being of God. God’s divinity and humanity are both characterized by His Dalitness.’ Prabhakar here combines both the victorization and valorization approaches outlined by Clarke and Rajkumar. Dalit agency is present in the preposition ‘though,’ but this remains ambiguous regarding the exact nature of participation without a how. Moreover, given that the long list of adjectives that modify Dalitness connote brokenness, protest and conquest (overcoming) are lost in pathos construed as ‘redemptive suffering.’ The cross affirms the reality of suffering (Dalit or otherwise), but resurrection rejects its ultimacy.

³⁸ Rajkumar, “‘How’ Does the Bible Mean?,” 417.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 418.

⁴⁰ Dianna Fuss, *Essential Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989), 2. Quoted in Rajkumar, “‘How’ Does the Bible Mean?,” 423.

image of Dalits.⁴¹ However, he does not want to abandon essentialism altogether.

Instead, following postcolonial thinkers like Gayathri Spivak, he desires to employ essentialism strategically.

Dalit Theology and Strategic Essentialism

Rajkumar grants that essentialism serves a useful purpose by providing, somewhat paradoxically, a fixed notion of identity that is not truly fixed. He states:

It has to be noted that essentialism has an enabling effect for identity-specific discourse like Dalit theology because without essentialism the whole notion of Dalit identity is questionable....Essentialism, thus, is about the politics of representation because linked to essentialism is the question of the political grounding of Dalit theology. If Dalits cannot be represented in a certain way, how can Dalit theology be taken seriously.⁴²

This 'strategic essentialism' allows for a collective identity to be fashioned by Dalits themselves, which in turn allows for Dalits to identify with one another and to present this identity to the public. Here Dalit theology, and Dalit discourse more generally, represents the oppression and stigmatization experienced by being Dalit requiring both Dalit and non-Dalit groups to face the reality of Dalitness. It is a pragmatic decision made by Dalits, and so it asserts their agency by embracing pathos only to then reject it.

Rajkumar cites the Dalit poet Arun Kamble's poem, 'The Life we Live' showing how he and other writers, 'have ironically essentialized the concept of Dalit not to reinforce stereotypes but as a deconstructive posture.'⁴³

⁴¹ Rajkumar, "'How' Does the Bible Mean?," 418. He does blunt his critique somewhat by acknowledging that he is not totally against this move, but instead wants to question its possible contribution to realizing liberation.

⁴² Ibid., 424.

⁴³ The lines he cites from Kamble are, 'We kicked and spat at for our piece of bread.../We down-getter degraders of our heritage.' Rajkumar does not comment specifically on the lines, saying only, 'Here one can see essentialism employed as a critique of and challenge to those who privilege from the dominant forms of existence.' However, in the first verse we can see a passive construction that teases at the subject-

From a pragmatic standpoint, Dalitness conceived of as a strategically essential attribute would seem to permit it to function essentially when it benefits the group—organization and conscientization—and accidentally when it becomes detrimental—reification or romanticization. Most importantly, it grants Dalit persons agency in the conception of identity. Laura Arnold notes how ‘strategic essentialism’ differs from regular essentialism in two important ways related to agency. She states:

First, the “essential attributes” are defined by the group themselves, not by outsiders trying to oppress the group. Second, in strategic essentialism, the “essential attributes” are acknowledged to be a construct. That is, the group rather paradoxically acknowledges that such attributes are not natural (or intrinsically essential), but are merely invoked when it is politically useful to do so. Moreover, members of the group maintain the power to decide when the attributes are “essential” and when they are not. In this way, strategic essentialism can be a powerful political tool.⁴⁴

Critically, the group is aware that the attribute, while performing essentially, is ultimately a construct. For Dalit identity this is especially important as Dalitness in its construction deconstructs casteist concepts intrinsically attributed to Dalit persons. If pathos can function strategically rather than intrinsically, Dalits have control over it. It would allow Dalit theologians to root Dalit theology in pathos experience in such a way that it is recognized to be real and profound, but not a permanent condition. Pathos can be overcome.

There are a several notable benefits for Dalit theology to think about Dalit identity through a strategic essentialism lens. The first is that it helps protect Dalit theology

ness (we) and subjecthood (object of oppression) of Dalit persons. The second, with an ironical wink of protest, again asserts Dalit agency, but does so to reject this oppressive state, this transgression, and this heritage—it never really was ‘our’ heritage. This is a more subtle protest poem, especially compared with Dalit Panther Keshav Meshram’s ‘One Day I Cursed that Mother-Fucker God,’ which makes the depths of Dalit pathos manifest and rages against a society and a deity that supports the status quo and does not know the Dalit plight—either by experience or awareness.

⁴⁴ Laura Arnold, <http://academic.reed.edu/english/courses/English558/Week2.html>. Quoted in Rajkumar, ‘“How” Does the Bible Mean?’, 424.

against what Rajkumar calls ‘recruitism,’ which he defines as ‘the objective of Dalit theologians who operate with *a priori* concepts and homogenous categorizations of “Dalit”...to make-over Dalit identity to fit their agenda.’⁴⁵ The criticism directed towards the Suffering Servant paradigm is based upon the first generation’s *a priori* conceptualization that Dalit identity is intrinsically revealed and understood in the community’s particular pathos. Here, a second attribute derived *a posteriori* would be protest. The ways in which it was exhibited in pre-Dalit theology Dalit discourse and religiosity could offer a corrective to both society and Dalit theology.⁴⁶ As Manchala states, ‘it is not suffering, Dalit pathos, alone but also their experience of struggle to overcome suffering and their determination to risk themselves for the sake of liberation and justice that now needs to be considered as the subject matter of theological reflection.’⁴⁷

Second, with respect to society, ‘Dalit,’ through the efforts of the various Dalit movements, has become the primary designation for these community’s in the media. While certainly a positive result, one effect has been that Dalit identity is no longer simply an intra-Dalit construct. The connotation, if not meaning, is no longer fixed by Dalits, but instead is now open to the interpretation of the broader Indian community and the world. Moreover, it has become a politically correct replacement for other terms like

⁴⁵ Rajkumar, “‘How’ Does the Bible Mean?,” 428.

⁴⁶ An important turn made between first and second generation Dalit theology has been the realization that alongside Dalit experience Dalit theology should also reflect upon and so incorporate Dalit culture into its theological project. Theologians like Clarke and A. M. Abraham Aryookuzhiel recognized a disconnect between Dalit theologians and Dalits by which Christianity often supplanted Dalit culture—the lens through which Dalit experience had been processed. See Aryookuzhiel, ‘Dalit Theology: A Movement of Counter-Culture,’ in *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, 250-60. And ‘China Pulayan: The Dalit Teacher of Sankaracharya,’ in *Religions of the Marginalized: Towards a Phenomenology and the Methodology of Study* (Bangalore: ISPCK, 1998), 1-17. This last essay examines Śaṅkara’s encounter with the Dalit/Chandala and argues that the revelation that the Dalit had always been Śiva in disguise exemplifies Brahminism’s attempts to write Dalits out of Hinduism.

⁴⁷ Deenabandhu Manchala, ‘Expanding the Ambit: Dalit Theological Contribution to Ecumenical Social Thought,’ in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty First Century*, 41.

harijan, outcaste, and untouchable. For those outside the movement, the term does not necessarily possess a liberative dimension. Instead it often signifies the preconceptions and affirms the prejudices held by the non-Dalit community.⁴⁸

Third, regarding Dalit theology, aside from the reasons noted above, a strategic essentialism might help prevent Dalit theology from equating Dalitness simply with brokenness, oppression, and exploitation. It certainly contains the experiences of these realities and recognizes them to be human structural constructions, but it cannot be reduced to these experiences alone.⁴⁹ At least not if one takes seriously the purpose for why the Modern Dalit Movement created ‘Dalitness’, which is itself a construct, in the first place. Clarke demonstrates how juxtaposing Dalit theological anthropology with casteist anthropology can be potent theologically. He states:

For Dalit Christian theology, human beings are created by God in love and for freedom. This is the basis of Dalit theological anthropology. All forms of enslavement, inequality, and dalitness were invented by human beings and not by God...the inequality among human beings, thus, is hurtful to God and contrary to God’s design. Moreover, it is the calculating work of human beings in contravention to God’s desire and human welfare.⁵⁰

However, as he offers a more essential identity, ‘created by God in love and for freedom’—one that could be said to be intrinsic to all persons—he emphasizes ‘dalitness’

⁴⁸ This can be seen in how the media reports on Dalit communities, which regularly separates atrocities suffered by Dalits from Dalit protest. While the first is a marked improvement upon the past, Dalit atrocities still remain underreported. It also means that only the pathos side of Dalit is emphasized reducing Dalits to objects of abuse rather than also subjects of their own liberation. The second, focuses especially on Dalit protests for political and economic rights. Although the agency is affirmed in such protest, the coverage often portrays them not the agents in their own liberation but persons awaiting for the beneficent intervention of the state. For more on the Dalit identity and its use outside the Dalit community, see Christopher Conway, ‘What is in a Name?: Recovering the Radicalness of Dalit’ in *Righting the Wrong: Perspectives on Dalit Literature*, ed. Asha Choubey (Jaipur: Enclave, 2014).

⁴⁹ The experiential aspect is important. Dalitness is the experience of being broken, oppressed, and exploited, but is not intrinsically being broken, etc. The significance for this distinction is that in the former Dalitness’ liberative potential remains, in the second it is curtailed. To think of it differently, given the pride and protest involved in the creation of Dalit identity, Dalits do not want to be not-Dalit. Instead, they want the experiences of brokenness, etc. to end.

⁵⁰ Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretive Theological Expertise,’ 35.

as negatively understood, equating it with enslavement and inequality. It is a condition/state of being that needs to be overcome rather than also a state of being that works to overcome.⁵¹ When employed/deployed, making such experiences essential to Dalit identity can help create critical consciousness within Dalit persons and society. The production of Dalit literature as well Dalit theology can make this pathos known as it is experienced and as it is perpetuated.

The critical turn then is being able to disemploy these attributes, knowing when and how to affirm that these characterizations of Dalitness are ultimately oppressive and exploitative constructs. In light of the Dalit movement, one can say that a person may be born into the conditions that we ascribe to Dalitness, experiencing the pathos that accompanies them, but these alone not a Dalit make. Dalit as a self-given name, a self-constructed identity fights against these conditions, recognizing their reality, but not their permanence. The liberative potency of Dalitness should not be obscured. Franklyn Balasundaram's Christology offers a way to maintain the tension needed for strategic essentialism to function correctly and liberationally. He states:

⁵¹ He does not here make a distinction between Dalitness and dalitness, in which the former would be positive and the latter negative. Samuel Rayan recasts Dalitness as sin, and traces its origins in the world to that first act of Dalitization. He states, 'Dalitness is a human creation. Its first victim was God; its most remarkable historical victim was Jesus Christ. The Bible tells of its origins and the way God dealt with it. In the beginning there was no dalitness, no oppression, no brokenness. All creation, including women and men, proceeded from the heart and hands, bearing the imprint of his creative hands and the image of his living heart...Then one day women and man made a weighty decision all by themselves and without God. They made God a dalit....Dalitness then invaded the human world. One cannot make untouchable without becoming untouchable oneself. Having Dalitized God, women and man found themselves naked; their sense of worth declined; they began to shift blame. And finally brother killed brother, the stronger destroyed the weaker because the latter was a friend of God.' Samuel Rayan, 'The Challenge of the Dalit Issue: Some Theological Perspectives,' in *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, ed. V. Devasahayam (Madras: Gurukul College, 1992), 127. Rayan exhibits many of Dalit Theology's tendencies: God as Dalit, the first Dalit; Christ as Dalit exemplar; the re-mythication of Dalit/Dalitness origins. These are useful strategies; however, there remains a troubling ambiguity. It is unclear if Dalits are responsible for this state—'one cannot make untouchable without becoming untouchable'—or merely the victims. Also uncertain is whether Dalitness now functions like original sin, either genetically, which would be to close to casteist understandings, or more along the lines Schleiermacher's originated original sin, which has greater liberative potential even as it does not quite fit with Rayan's narrative.

We might accept suffering to the extent that suffering helps us overcome the suffering inflicted upon us by others. Thus, in preaching, projecting and emphasizing the servant image, we need to be careful. This means that we should not romanticize the concept of suffering, e.g. the Sufferer and the Servant Jesus syndrome. Dalit theology should project Jesus that has worth, dignity, and freedom. Let us not preach a Jesus who has a crown and who has attained glory, nor a Jesus who has suffered to the end and was finally put to death, but a Jesus who is the true man, a man of freedom, identity, worth, and dignity and a man with a mission.⁵²

Balasundaram understands Dalit theology's mission, and Jesus', to foster humanization. In doing so he aligns himself closely to M. M. Thomas whose work on humanization and salvation was a key turn in Indian Christian Theology that opened the way for Dalit theology.⁵³ For both, humanization means the realization of full humanness—freedom, dignity, and worth—materially, ethically, relationally, psychologically, and spiritually. Jesus, the one who has attained this state fully, reveals this state to persons in his life and ministry and makes its realization possible in his death

⁵² Franklyn J. Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle and its Implications for Theological Education,' *Bangalore Theological Forum* 24.3-4 (1997): 90.

⁵³ See Adrian Bird, *M. M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology*, dissertation University of Edinburgh, 2008. Bird offers a well-nuanced assessment of Thomas' influence on and complications for Dalit theology.

M. M. Thomas linked humanization with the Church's mission, an idea to which Dalit theologians like Rajkumar are returning. Thomas states, 'Salvation remains eschatological, but historical responsibility within the eschatological framework cannot but include the task of humanization of the world in secular history. The mission of salvation and the task of humanization are integrally related to each other, even if they cannot be considered identical. The ultimate destiny of man in the resurrection beyond sin, guilt, and death must have its realization, however partial it may be, in terms of his historical destiny; just as no humanism which does not take into serious account the reality of sin as self-righteousness, guilt, and fear of death in the light of the Cross of Christ can grapple responsibly with the forces of dehumanization emerging in ever-new forms and achieve even tolerable human conditions... The question is not is not where one enters, but whether one reaches a point where one is aware of the interrelatedness of the historical and eternal, and the presence of the eternal in the historical and the human. This means our mission is to make clear that salvation is the spiritual inwardness of true humanization, and that humanization is inherent in the message of salvation in Christ.' M.M. Thomas, 'Salvation and Humanization: A Crucial Issue in the Theology of Mission for India,' *International Review of Mission* 60 (1971): 30-1. Thomas' article is his contribution to the debate that emerged within the World Council of Churches following the Uppsala Assembly in 1968. Here the Assembly announced the need for mission to address the historical, social, and human dimension of mission rather than merely the spiritual. Thomas offers a reserved critique of Leslie Newbigin, the Barthian missiologist and then Bishop of Madras, but directs most his efforts against Peter Beyerhaus, a Tübingen missiologist, who was especially upset by the International Missionary Society's merger with the WCC and the resulting report from Uppsala, which he saw as a 'radical shift of centre from God to man, and accordingly the replacement of Theology by Anthropology.' *Ibid.*, 28.

and resurrection. As such, Balasundaram does not wish to abandon completely either a suffering or glorified Christ, but rather calls for Jesus' true humanity—humanity in its full humanness—not to be precluded by these two prevalent paradigms.

The fourth benefit to treating Dalitness' essentialization strategically rather than intrinsically relates to the question of methodological exclusivism and the formation of liberative partnerships in two important ways. The first is how strategic essentialism might allow Dalit theology to become more methodologically inclusive while simultaneously maintaining its Dalitness. Can the category be expanded so as to include persons not traditionally identified as Dalit? The second is how strategic essentialism might be utilized counter-ideologically. If, when applied to Dalit identity, the use of essentialism is beneficial in certain instances and problematic in others, can and should the same be said about its relation to Hinduism in general and Brahminism in particular. There may be a benefit to applying a strategic essentialism to 'Brahmin' and Brahmanism, which could critically engage the ideological aspect of identity without rendering an irreversible judgment against high caste persons or Hinduism. While such an application would not have to result in a complete embrace with high caste Hinduism, it may lead to a better understanding on how these traditions thought through—wrestled with, made sense of—the religious and social dimensions of caste. Moreover, unconsidered or unrecognized liberative partnerships might be discovered.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ See Clooney, 'Reengaging the Classical Traditions,' 423-5; Eric J. Lott, 'Hindu Theology's Forgotten Struggles,' in *Moving Forms of Theology: Faith Talk's Changing Contexts*, ed. by Israel Selvanayagam (Bangalore: ISPCK, 2002), 76-83; and Timothy C. Tennent, 'Contextualizing the Sanskritic Tradition to Serve Dalit Theology,' *Missiology: An International Review* 25.3 (1997): 343-9.

Dalit Theology and Methodological Exclusivism

As noted, methodological exclusivism—limiting the doing of Dalit theology to Dalits—serves a pragmatic as well as theological purpose. Pragmatically, it protects Dalit theology from cooption or corruption—‘ideological subsumation’ and the ‘homogenizing propensities of elite theology’—by limiting its practitioners to those who know intimately the pathos associated with Dalitness.⁵⁵ Theologically, as these particular experiences of Dalitness serve as the grounds for theological reflection upon the Gospel, Dalit theology by its very essence could only be done by Dalits. Clarke points to a tension, one even acknowledged by Nirmal in his statement on the issue, present in Dalit Christian theology. Its Dalitness would appear to necessitate this methodological exclusivism, while its Christian-ness—the ‘interrelatedness of theological knowledge and the inclusive character of the Christian community’—strongly suggests a need for theological inclusiveness.⁵⁶ Strategic essentialism, given its own paradoxical nature, may help Dalit theology work through this methodological/ theological quandary.

It is important to note that for Nirmal methodological exclusivism did not necessarily entail theological exclusivism, a claim often launched against Dalit theology. Rather, in his thinking Dalit theology was working towards greater theological inclusivism by allowing Dalits a contributing voice in the creation of Indian Christian theology.⁵⁷ J. Jayakiran Sebastian lifts up Nirmal’s emphasis on ‘inter-relationality,’

⁵⁵ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 172. Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition,’ 20.

⁵⁶ Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition,’ 21.

⁵⁷ Dyanchand Carr also argues that Dalit theology in fact is a fight for inclusion into a theological landscape that had for so long excluded Dalits. He states, ‘Christians bound by traditional attitudes and those Christians who stand to benefit by those attitudes, are voicing a false concern. They warn us that Dalit Theology will endanger the unity of the church, that it will foster division and polarization. They refuse to recognize that through their supposed concert to preserve a non-existing Christian unity they

which he identifies as Nirmal's call for a 'recognition of the ambivalence of all inter-relationality, where the process of creative exploration is not content to set attainable goals, but rather to recognize that the ongoing quest for informed relationality is itself the goal.'⁵⁸ Although he notes that it is unclear whether this shows Nirmal moving towards advocating 'some kind of reconciliatory theology,' it demonstrates that even early on Dalit theology recognized a need to be relationally inclusive. However, given the stress on methodological exclusivism as pragmatically and theologically necessary, developing a robust Dalit understanding of relationality never occurred in the first generation.⁵⁹

One place where Nirmal's idea of relationality and inclusivism is most prominent is in his experiential and epistemological distinctions of pathos. Here pathos, and so Dalit identity, still operates intrinsically, but Nirmal provides an avenue for non-Dalit persons to contribute to and support Dalit theology. Nirmal provides three ways of knowing: pathetically, empathetically and sympathetically. This epistemological tripartite arose in response to questions on the meaning and extent of its methodological exclusivism.

Nirmal states:

Many people ask me if I rule out the possibility of dalit theology being done by non-Dalits. The answer to such a question must be a complex one. I would maintain that there are three different modes of knowing. These are the *pathetic* knowing, the *empathetic* knowing and the *sympathetic* knowing.⁶⁰

Dalit experience, in its particularity, allows for the most immediate level of knowing Dalit pathos: pathetic knowing. Each subsequent level extends out from this

advocate the worship of a god who endorses domination.' Dyanchand Carr, 'A Biblical Basis for Dalit Theology,' in *Indigenous People*, 235.

⁵⁸ J. Jayakiran Sebastian, 'Creative Exploration: Arvind P. Nirmal's Ongoing Contribution to Christian Theology,' *Bangalore Theological Forum* 21.2 (1999): 48.

⁵⁹ Rajkumar notes that Nirmal's understanding of relationality remains 'fraught with ambiguity and is not as straightforward as his call for methodological exclusivism.' Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 172.

⁶⁰ Nirmal, 'Doing Dalit Theology from a Dalit Perspective,' 141-2. Emphasis original.

point. Those persons and communities that experience suffering, oppression, and exploitation that is similar to but not identical with Dalit pathos suffering possess an empathetic mode of knowing. They can relate to it more readily as they too share familiar experiences. The third group, sympathetic knowers, are those farthest removed from Dalit pathos, but who nevertheless wish to ally themselves with Dalits' and support their efforts towards liberation.

Nirmal himself never resolves the complexity introduced by these modalities. And if one were to stick with a strict, intrinsic understanding of Dalitness, especially one situated predominantly in pathos, to what degree could a sympathetic knowing be said to lead to an authentic Dalit theology? Not very much, and yet Nirmal does provide a heuristic for including non-Dalit voices. If Dalitness is reconceived to be strategically essential, and if that conception of Dalitness includes also protest then Dalit theology would be capable of better fostering liberative partnerships necessary for Dalit liberation not only with non-Christian dalits, but also with non-Dalit Christians and even non-Dalit non-Christians. Essentialism in its strategic form would allow Dalit theology to keep pathos essential to Dalitness, but would now also allow protest to complement and perhaps correct it. As pathos epistemology spirals out towards lesser degrees of knowing Dalitness, protest epistemology spirals back in from the general to the particular as liberative partnerships are formed with communities seeking to overcome oppression and exploitation in all its manifested particularities.

Furthermore, as strategic essentialism recognizes the agency inherent in identity's construction, Dalit theology would retain the freedom to accept or reject its partners and

their possible contributions.⁶¹ Clarke sets an appropriate qualification, ‘other communities can participate in doing Dalit theology, but must recognize their respective distance and respectful relatedness to the distinctiveness of Dalit pain-pathos.’⁶² A greater theological inclusivism would accentuate this interrelatedness with other liberation and contextual theologies. It would work also to encourage liberative partnerships with those on the outer-most peripheries of pathos and protest. That is those communities that may even seem initially antagonistic towards Dalit theology, but whom through commitment, conscientization, and conversion can be made key partners in liberation even if they are not doing Dalit theology per se.

Strategic Essentialism and Dalit Counter-Ideology

Strategic essentialism may also help Dalit theology rethink how it implements its counter-ideology. If Dalitness ought not be construed in an intrinsic way, should this apply to Brahminism and casteism as well? As a transitional figure situated between the two generations, Clarke’s own thinking shows a developing perspective on Brahminism and casteism’s essentialness as it relates to counter-ideology/theology. The first quotation situates the question. He states:

It may be pertinent to problematize the much celebrated move of positing Dalit religions and culture as ‘counter religion’ and ‘counter culture.’ The terms themselves sound remarkably impressive and striking. In Christian circles, it is very much influenced by the urge to find continuity with the prophetic strands of the anti-*status quo* movements. While this resistive and oppositional tack of Dalit religion and culture cannot be overlooked and undervalued, one must be careful not to construct the culture and religion of Dalits as essentially characterized by

⁶¹ Even in rejection, one could say that a partnership or at least a contribution was made in advancing Dalit theology forward in response to it.

⁶² Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition,’ 22. This ‘respective distance and respected relatedness’ can apply to the Dalit community itself, where some individuals may enjoy more privilege than others.

the prefix ‘counter’ as if its whole nature can be captured in its reaction to something that is a primordial given, such as caste Hindu religion and culture. The problem with this approach is that it reinforces the Self-Other dichotomy. This sets up caste culture as the Self and then interprets Dalit culture as the Other which actualizes itself through responding and reacting to the primary reality of the former.⁶³

While acknowledging the intent and strength in conceiving Dalit theology as primarily a counter-theology, Clarke also shows that in doing so Dalit theology becomes principally responsive and reactive. Brahminism, which it is countering, is granted primacy, sets the agenda, and defines the questions.⁶⁴ This challenge to presenting Dalit theology purely as countering continues through today in his thought especially in the problematic binary that results. In this binarism Dalits are established as the object, ‘Other’ forced to refute and reject the subject, ‘Self’ that controls and directs the discourse. Within this conceptual framework, Dalit theology becomes Dalit only in its oppositional relationship to the dominant, and in doing so becomes Other-ed.⁶⁵

Clarke warns against limiting Dalit’s ‘nature,’ essence, to merely a reaction against Brahminism. While not wanting to restrict Dalitness, he allows for some

⁶³ Sathianathan Clarke, ‘Subaltern Culture as a Resource for People’s Liberation: A Critical Inquiry into Dalit Culture Theory,’ *Religion and Society* 44.4 (1997): 91-2.

⁶⁴ If Brahminism can be viewed through the lens of strategic essentialism, perhaps those fictive elements of it can be better recognized. Raf Gelders and S. N. Balagangadhara present the ways in which ‘Brahminism’ was a creation/invention of the West—missionaries and Orientalists. Conversely, one can see Vivekananda’s on strategic essentialism operative as he reclaims the essence of Hinduism so as to counter such depictions. Raf Gelders and S. N. Balagangadhara, ‘Rethinking Orientalism: Colonialism and the Study of Indian Tradition,’ *History of Religions* 51.2 (2011): 101-128.

⁶⁵ Clarke does well to recognize the ways in which Dalit theology contributes to its own Other-ing through the needed negative turn in identity affirmation. As he states, ‘A courageous stance of rejection is the first act of self-affirmation, even if expressed through the embrace of a negation. To state that we are not this and not that (*neti neti*) is an empowering act. It delegitimizes all efforts of the dominant caste communities to represent the identity of the Dalit self.’ Unfortunately, Clarke leaves his Upanishadic wink(?) without comment, but he does identify the difficulty in a purely deconstructive turn. He states, ‘Counter-theological postures are generally prone to debilitations that characterize reactionary movements. The complex working out of a theology of rejection incorporates a modality of refutation with the stratagem of deconstruction and sets in motion a discursive process that is predominantly defensive. Such an oppositional mode for doing theology incessantly entices Dalits to jump into a self-effacing whirlpool that involves chasing the logic and agenda of the dominant discursive protagonists at the expense of claiming their own rich experiences.’ Clarke, ‘Introductory and Interpretive Theological Exposition, 24-5, 27 respectively.

ambiguity regarding the essence of caste Hinduism and culture. Importantly, he does qualify this Hinduism and culture as ‘caste,’ and so avoids the simple, reductive elision that renders all Hinduism as caste Hinduism. However, in identifying these as a ‘primordial given’—most probably an oblique reference to the *Puruṣasūkta* in the Ṛg Veda—he remains unclear as to whether he views them as such or instead is concerned that both Dalit theologians and caste Hindus/culture do. Either way, the resulting bipolarity is problematic as it legitimates caste ideology as an essentiality necessary for Dalit discourse to make sense and exist. There would be no Dalitness without a Brahmin-ness to which and of which Dalit discourse stands in opposition. Intrinsically essentialized bipolarity is then as much a problem for Dalitness’ pathos as it is for protest.

Clarke resolves the matter in his latter thinking through an appeal to the historical reality of Dalit/non-Dalit encounters. Recognizing the rhetorical value in propping up such binaries, he nevertheless questions their ultimate appropriateness. If Dalit theology reflects upon Dalit experience, most often *vies-à-viz* inter-caste dynamics, then this reflection should include this experience in its totality. He states:

The further suggestion that these binary representations do to take on such neat communitarian dualisms is highly debatable. Any discerning student of Indian society would have to contend with the random, arbitrary and ambiguous manifestations of meritorious and degenerate beliefs and practices in all sections of the human community, i.e., Dalit and Caste alike.⁶⁶

Random, arbitrary, and ambiguous suggest a lack of agency on the part of these inter-actors. Although they clearly demonstrate through actual events how ideology breaks down in practical engagements between Dalit and non-Dalit persons, they do not

⁶⁶ Sathianathan Clarke, ‘Dalit Religions as Resourceful Symbolic Domain: A Critical Review of Theories of Religion and the Constructive Proposition to Glean the Richness of Dalit Subjectivity,’ *Religion and Society* 49.2-3 (2004): 38-39. In this essay, Clarke is challenging the unifying and homogenizing practices of Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism), which attempt to create a ‘universal language in order to unite the whole human community via the essence of religion.’

account for the pragmatic decisions that can create an apparent ideological cease-fire—moments in which multiple competing interests are negotiated through an appeal to multiple competing logics. Politics and economics especially necessitate a practical and pragmatic willingness to interact with other persons, and such interactions occur despite cultural or religious regulations that would seem to prohibit them. This reality does complicate a simple bipolar essentialism, but it may not be able to outright dismiss its operation at the theoretical level and therefore, its overall continued prevalence at the practical and experiential. Dominant/ dominating ideologies are capable of handling internal inconsistencies because, in the end, they require them. Dominant discourse dictates the logic for following and the justifications for breaking or ignoring the ‘rules’ when it is convenient or to its benefit to do so.

Clarke’s most important contribution here is his ability to problematize both ‘structural unity’ and ‘foundational bipolarity’ as theoretical frameworks for capturing and essentializing Dalit/non-Dalit relationships. Moreover, his reflective process exemplifies the importance in keeping both deconstructive (counter-theological) and constructive (theological) turns in close dialectical tension. By deconstructing structural unity—which presents Dalit persons as ‘submissively living their individual and collective lives by “replicating” the religious ideal and practices of the Caste Community’—and foundational bipolarity—which ‘stresses the divergent and oppositional nature of the relationships between Dalit and Caste religion’—he challenges a presupposed unity, which serves an underlying hegemonic purpose, that does not adequately capture the dynamic plurality in these relationships.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ibid., 33-4.

In the constructive turn, he argues for ‘symbolic constructivism’ that recognizes multiple cultural, economical, and political discursive contexts, and ‘presupposes that Dalit communities as “subjects are capable of interpreting and reconstructing their identities within cultural discursive contexts to which they have access.”’⁶⁸ Dalits are then not beholden to any one particular discursive regime in their identity formation, rather they incorporate ‘multimodal, multidimensional, and multimedia’ sources to produce and store knowledge.⁶⁹ Ultimately, there is no unified essence or unified source to which Dalit construction appeals, but rather a complex network of resources (Dalit and non-Dalit) that contribute to creating and changing Dalit identity. Clarke contends that this way of being and thinking protects against any abstraction deracinated from the ‘persons and processes of its production.’⁷⁰ The dialectic at work in ‘symbolic constructivism’ would be countering—constructing—countering, a needed rubric for guiding Dalit discourse and theology.

Clarke offers an important bottom-up approach that destabilizes intrinsic essentialism as it relates to the religious theories applied to make sense of Dalit religions’ relationship to Hinduism. His assessment of foundational bipolarity is most pertinent to the constructive turn in Dalit theology. Although presenting two distinct (essentialized) groups, functional bipolarity works within a unified system based upon complementarity. He states:

What is important to this paradigm is the basic presupposition that reality is one, even while expressing itself in complimentary binaries: both the oppositional poles are needed to manifest the completeness of the complex nature of reality. It is also steeped in a theological framework that categorically classifies all things

⁶⁸ Ibid., 39. Here Clarke quotes Karin Kapdia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste, and Class in Rural South India* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 48.

within a comprehensive system, which exhibits a dialectic polarity between moral/virtuous and immoral/base.⁷¹

Traditionally, Dalits have found themselves placed along the immoral/base axis, and so have served Brahminism by providing a negative corollary to the Brahminic ideal. More recently, with the emergence of Dalit discourse, the poles have been reversed. Dalits now are situated along the moral/virtuous axis, and Brahminism stands in contradistinction. In both instances the group who establishes the unified system also enjoys the positive placement, while the other is reductively represented as simply the opposite. While granting the rhetorical value in controlling the positioning, Clarke reveals the moral ambiguity and historical inaccuracy in this kind of essentializing.

Although Rajkumar and Clarke both have problematized intrinsic essentialism, the former noting its liberative limitations and the latter its inherent inconsistencies, both do so primarily from an intra-Dalit perspective. That is primarily as it relates to the construction of Dalit identity, and not necessarily as it relates to the Dalit construction of non-Dalit identity.⁷² However, in his critique of foundational bipolarity Clarke does point a way to rethink the effects of this prominent theory in Dalit discourse. He states, ‘in many ways the foundational bipolarity model advances an essentialist dialectic which construes essence as always appearing in binary forms.’⁷³ Extending this logic a bit further, if an essentialized understanding of Dalitness is problematic, might an essentialized understanding of non-Dalitness be as well. Three related, if rhetorically devised, questions emerge: 1) Does ‘Dalitness’ require ‘Brahminism’ for its identity and self-understanding? 2) If yes, does Dalit discourse/theology require Brahminism to be

⁷¹ Ibid., 34.

⁷² Clarke does offer a reserved criticism of Kancha Ilaiah whom he identifies as representative of foundational bipolarity within Dalit discourse.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 38.

overcome so as to achieve Dalit liberation? 3) If yes, does essentialism ultimately stymie liberation because Dalitness is legitimized only in its relation to Brahminism?⁷⁴ Dalit theologians like Rajkumar are now asking these types of questions. While acknowledging the import of identity affirmation, they recognize that its centrality has moved liberative social vision to the periphery.

Dalit Theology, Liberative Partnerships, and Liberative Social Vision

Early in the development of Dalit theology (1988), K. Wilson proposed a liberative social vision that called for Dalit theology to help ‘effect humanization in the world’ that would include a new value base and a new culture. He states:

The act of transvaluation of values should on the one hand expose the oppressors’ guilt and on the other hand disclose the human future of the oppressed. The meaning of all of this is the establishment of a new culture. Let us in the context, be quite clear that we propose to establish neither a Christian culture, nor a religious culture, nor a sectarian culture nor a nationalistic culture but a human culture... With such a world outlook, Christian dalit theology does not forbid Christian dalits from working with non-dalit authentic Christians, the renaissance Hindus, the reformed Muslims and humanistic forces from various other faiths

⁷⁴ Victor Anderson’s work informs these questions as he presents a similar challenge to Black Theology in his work, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. Much of his thinking on ontological blackness resonates with what in this context one could call ontological Dalitness. Like Clarke, he is wary of bipolarity dialectics, as they fail to capture the reality and diversity of black experience on account that ontological blackness totalizes and categories these experiences into the binaries of, ‘slavery and freedom, negro and citizen, insider and outsider, black and white, struggle and survival.’ Because they are essential, ‘such binary polarities admit no transcendence or mediation.’ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 14. Regarding the limitations of purely identity driven conception of liberation, he states, ‘Talk about liberation becomes hard to justify where freedom appears nothing more than the defiant self-assertion of revolutionary racial consciousness that requires for its legitimacy the opposition of white racism. Where there exists no possibility of transcending blackness that whiteness created, African American theologies of liberation must be seen not only as crisis theologies; they remain theologies in crisis of legitimation.’ Ibid, 117. Anderson offers as an alternative cultural fulfillment: ‘the reflexive integration of basic human needs and subjective goods. It involves satisfaction of categorical goods that beings minimally require for maintain biological life (life, safety, work, leisure, knowledge, and the like). It also involves the satisfaction of subjective goods (friendship, peace of mind, integrity of conscience, and spiritual meaning) that individuals require for alleviating subjective alienation, assuring subjective equilibrium, and realizing positive personalities. Fulfillment of such needs and goods motivates the cultural activities of persons within societies.’ Ibid., 49.

and ideologies, on a common human platform that thus hasten the process of establishing a human and humane culture which is why ‘the Word became flesh.’⁷⁵

Wilson realized that Dalit Christian theology would require partners to help bring about humanization—his liberative social vision—as its import was not limited only to Dalit Christians. He provides a list for such possible candidates—non-Dalit authentic Christians, etc.—all of whose own liberative social visions align well with Dalit theology’s. Unfortunately, his contemporaries did not follow up in building such a coalition. Nearly a decade later, K. C. Abraham in an article titled, ‘Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead,’ noted that achieving solidarity amongst other non-Christian Dalit groups remained a task ahead.⁷⁶ He also noted that this task needs to include non-Dalit groups. Here he grounded this need in his own liberative social vision: ‘to evolve a pluriform community which allows different identities to flourish.’ He continues:

Without this common vision our individual identities when affirmed as mutually exclusive will destroy human community... While we reject a universalizing tendency in sectarian theologies, especially those that came out of dominant groups, we need to keep the dialogue open in such a way that there is scope of learning from others.⁷⁷

Like Wilson, Abraham recognized that in order to actualize a liberative social vision liberative partnerships were necessary. Moreover, these liberative partnerships could help inform that liberative social vision; different groups can and need to learn from one another.

⁷⁵ K. Wilson, ‘An Approach to Christian Dalit Theology,’ 56.

⁷⁶ K. C. Abraham, ‘Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead,’ *Bangalore Theological Forum* 29.1-2 (1997): 46. He states, ‘They are now divided; each group has developed its particular form of sub-culture. But without suppressing such individual Dalit identities, how can we build a common front? Here theology faces a special problem. A dalit theology is based on Christian symbols and language. How do we evolve a common language? Are there insights from other traditions which we must integrate into our theological formulations?’ Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 173.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

A little over a decade after Abraham, Rajkumar continues to push Dalit theology to ‘overcome its theological ghettoization and explore the liberative dimensions of other non-Dalit theologies.’⁷⁸ He admits that in its self-construction, Dalit theology has lacked a ‘sufficient theological impetus to learn from non-Dalits’ and that its attitudes towards other theologies, Christian or otherwise, ‘has been one of broad generalizations that such theologies are anti-Dalit.’⁷⁹ This is especially the case for Hindu theologies that are regularly depicted as Brahminic and so hegemonic and hierarchical. However, with such essentialism having been challenged and with the ever-pressing need to continue to work out and work towards Dalit liberation, engagement with non-Dalit traditions becomes not just a possibility but a necessity. As this call arrives at the end of his work, and is only tentatively probed, one could say that this is the next great frontier in Dalit theology.

The purpose of these sections has been to show the ways in which current Dalit theologians have reflected critically upon some of the theological and methodological implications born from the first generation’s emphasis on methodological exclusivism and an essentialized Dalit identity grounded in pathos. While acknowledging that these decisions allowed for Dalit theology to develop into a legitimate and needed theological discipline, they have recognized also that such considerations have inadvertently curtailed its liberative potential. Highlighting these aspects of Dalit theology and working through them in conjunction with Dalit theologians has immediate import for the project that awaits just ahead. While Dalit theology appears to be heading in a directions towards greater inclusivity with respect to who can contribute to the doing of Dalit theology and

⁷⁸ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 172. See also, 169 where Rajkumar links this lack of partnerships to his concern with Dalit theology’s over-reliance on bipolar methodology and its ‘ability to move beyond ideological and theological ghettoization.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 172, 173.

the resource upon which Dalit theology can reflect, its history has shown that such openness and such projects have been pointed to often, but seldom pursued.

The following section is the comparative turn of this project, and will explore the ways in which Swami Vivekananda's understanding of seva might help Dalit theology address some of these concerns and help it work towards actualizing Dalit liberation. It is one example of what such a venture might look like. In this way it, really I, takes up that tentative but nevertheless present invitation offered by Dalit theology to explore this new frontier. I do so not apart or above Dalit theology and Vivekananda, but within—sympathetically—and beside—comparatively. However, in acknowledging my own 'respective distance and respectful relatedness' and that of Vivekananda's, I also acknowledge a different vantage point from which to view and through which to reflect upon these questions. It is not better view, just a different one, and one that I hope can provide a few, fruitful insights on liberative service, identity affirmation, epistemology, and praxis.

Comparative, Liberative Service: Dalit Theology and Swami Vivekananda

Introduction

In this concluding section service's liberative potential for Dalit theology will be reexamined through a comparative theological reflection that brings Dalit theology into conversation with Swami Vivekananda and his understanding of sevā. The intent is to recover this important paradigm from Dalit theology's first generation and to rethink it in light of both Dalit theology's objectives—identity affirmation and a liberative social vision—and Vivekananda. This reflection will consider not only service's place within

Dalit theology—now problematized by the current generation—but explore how Vivekananda’s own reworking of *sevā* might be methodologically beneficial. Through this comparative process, key components in Dalit theology like agency, identity, epistemology and praxis will be expanded upon and/or rethought. This project is undertaken with a sincere awareness and appreciation for Dalit theology’s concern that engaging non-Dalit theologies, especially Hindu theologies, risks cooption and domination, all the more so when the person doing the engaging is not Dalit.⁸⁰ However, it is also undertaken with the awareness that such a project need not stray from the goals and ends that Dalit theology pursues, but in fact can help them to be realized. In this way, it is sympathetically and humbly conducted and remains ever at the service of Dalit theology, Dalit persons, and Dalit communities.

Dalit Theology and the Ambiguity of Service: A Re-reconsideration

Dalit Theology

Service, especially as it was presented in connection with the Suffering Servant paradigm, provided an important lens through which the first generation could rethink and revalue Dalit experience and Dalit plight. Here service means practically the dehumanizing and/or polluting occupations that Indian society has forced Dalit persons to perform. It also recognizes that Brahminism has essentialized Dalit and *Śūdra* nature to be servile; they perform these types of services because they are ontologically fit to perform them and them alone. As Dalit theology is grounded in the particular pathos

⁸⁰ This concern extends also to the project’s treatment of Swami Vivekananda, whose person and thought will not be reduced simply to a tool, but lifted up as a partner—in similarity and difference, in consonance and dissonance, in support and critique.

associated with Dalitness, Nirmal did not shy away from the reality of service. Rather he embraced it so as to valorize it.

Throughout his treatment of the Suffering Servant paradigm he strategically disrupts casteist notions like the *sva-dharma* of Dalits as service and the idea that Dalits are innately servile by ascribing these attributes to God's own nature/duty, *sva-dharma*. He states, 'the amazing claim of Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the *Svayambhu* does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the *sva-Dharma* of the God.'⁸¹ This is a theological statement that counters the claim that Dalits are divinely mandated/created to serve, and instead proclaims that God is the one who serves. In Nirmal's thought the paradigm also humanizes, perhaps deifies, dehumanizing service. Dalits image God, as God knows intimately and performs freely such service.

Current Dalit theologians like Clarke and Rajkumar have found such a valorized affirmation of Dalit service to be problematic.⁸² As noted their primary critique centers on the disconnect between identity affirmation and liberative social vision. Although they acknowledge the possible merits in affirming the servant nature of God, as it injects dignity into this particular aspect of Dalitness, they wonder whether in the end it possesses sufficient liberative potency to help Dalits overcome it. Or does valorization contribute to the further essentialization of Dalit servanthood and thus support of the status quo by deifying the dehumanizing—making it divinely accepted and acceptable? If Dalit theology seeks to protest and overcome this experience, does rendering it to be part

⁸¹ Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,' 224.

⁸² In conversations with Rajkumar, Clarke, and other Dalit theologians about this project, very early in our exchanges the problem of service for Dalit theology often came up.

of God's very nature prevent that from occurring—its rejection being somehow now a rejection of God? Rajkumar arrives at the heart of the tension when he states, 'This affirmation [God's servant humanity is reflected in the Dalit] has the possibility of enhancing Dalit self-understanding as bearing the image of God, but it could also imply passive acceptance of their religiously imposed inferiority and acquiescence to the prevailing status quo.'⁸³ Here identity affirmation and social liberative vision seem to be at odds.

As the remaining sections unfold, I will propose and outline a rather different conception of service, but one that still does honor to both objectives of Dalit theology—identity affirmation and a liberative social vision. The first step will be to frame this new understanding of service in a way that would allow Dalits, and all persons, to realize the image of God and to actualize a liberative social vision. Rather than focusing on how God participates in the particular forms of Dalit service, I will instead look at how Dalits may participate in God's particular form of service. There will be some overlap between these two services, especially as the ambit of Dalitness is expanded to include protest alongside pathos, but the primary transition will be away from the strict definition of service as occupational and towards service as participating in the ushering in of God's Kingdom.

⁸³ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 67.

Swami Vivekananda: Sevā and Service

Swami Vivekananda's rethinking of sevā offers a valuable framework for reconsidering service's liberative dimensions for Dalit theology. It should be noted that there are notable dissimilarities between their respective starting points, the underlying ontology that supports each, and performative agency—their respective subjects and objects of sevā/service. Vivekananda's sevā already operates within a religious setting, whereas Dalit theology's service begins with service understood as servile, dehumanizing occupations—that is, the condition of being a slave, bound to serve against one's will. Furthermore, sevā is grounded in Vivekananda's Synthetic and Practical Vedanta, which possesses an ontology of non-difference between the individual self (ātman) and the Supreme Self (Brahman). Dalit Christian theology possesses an ontology of difference between God, the Creator, and the world/humanity, the created. Although this gap is bridged by Christ's incarnation and narrowed by notions like the *imago Dei* and Orthodox *theosis*, Christian theology cannot, nor should it, simply appropriate Vivekananda's Advaita.

Regarding performative agency, it must be noted that in Vivekananda's construction the poor, the outcaste, the illiterate, and the downtrodden are understood to be primarily the objects of sevā and not its subjects. His liberative social vision did grant the possibility for all persons to be able to perform sevā and attain spiritual liberation. However, because his target audiences were those persons in positions of relative authority, who were ensnared by privilege (material, spiritual wealth) and prejudice (casteism), and who kept the poor, poor and the outcaste, outcaste, Vivekananda directed his challenge and charge to them.

In Dalit theology, theologians have recognized the need for Dalits to become the subjects of their own liberation. As caste oppression and economic exploitation have made them objects of history, the assertion of their agency in the process of overcoming these structures is necessary for liberation to be authentically actualized. Rajkumar states, ‘the condescending view of Dalits as mere “recipients of charitable liberation” needs to be rethought. For change to happen the agency of Dalits must be theologically affirmed.’⁸⁴ All three are important distinctions to keep in mind as we go forward. I do not think they preclude a comparative engagement. In fact, these distinctions through contrast and relief advance the reflection forward.

Vivekananda reworked an understanding of *sevā* that had until then operated primarily within a devotional and ritualistic setting. The preexisting conception of *sevā*, which for Vivekananda was primarily Vaiṣṇavism, limited devotional service’s appropriate objects to the deity and to the community of devotees. While not able to be offered *sevā* in this intra-community way, all other persons were permitted to be the beneficiaries of compassion—recipients of liberative theological instruction (no small thing). Recognizing the divine to be essentially present in all persons through his *advaita* Vedantic understanding of non-difference, Vivekananda extended *sevā*’s category to include all persons. As each person inherently possesses the divine within, regardless of the accidentals like gender and caste, each was an appropriate object for *sevā*.

Alongside expanding *sevā*’s recipient-base, Vivekananda also reconfigured devotional service’s practice and implementation. Here again he built upon its ritualistic context, most notably the devotional practices associated with *pūjā*. His disdain for the extravagant ceremonies performed in India’s many temple complexes and his concern

⁸⁴ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 61.

over private and individual worship in the home, show his desire to redirect those services and offerings to the Living God embodied in the poor, downtrodden and outcaste. In order to facilitate their distribution, he aimed to create a band of sanyassins, who along with offering spiritual education (akin to Vaiṣṇava compassion) would create and direct institutions of service throughout India. His efforts were a comprehensive recasting of India's theological and philosophical traditions and practices aimed now to serving and uplifting its downtrodden masses.

Dalit Theology: Service Reframed

Given the difficult ontological and occupational baggage that 'service' carries, it may seem more appropriate, and certainly easier, to seek another partner for Dalit theological reflection. However, when rethought in light of both Dalit Theology and Vivekananda, I think service possesses a great deal of liberative potency that if actualized can aid in identity affirmation and a liberative social vision. As has been seen with very name 'Dalit,' Dalit discourse and Dalit theology exhibit a remarkable creative ability in transforming perception and reception and transvaluing concepts and identities. Service would benefit from such a treatment, and would in turn serve Dalit theology well in its new framing.

While agreeing with Rajkumar and others that emphasizing Dalit service poses a real risk, I do not think that it is an irredeemable concept.⁸⁵ The difficulty arises in how first generation Dalit theologians chose to convey service and how they accentuated it with the particularity of Dalit pathos. Service was reduced to the immediate experiences

⁸⁵ Nor do I think Rajkumar views it as irredeemable as well.

of forced occupations and the humiliations that accompany them. However, Nirmal comes very close to pursuing a different line for service. He states:

Unfortunately, this word ‘service,’ ministry or *diakonia* has lost its cutting edge. A shop tells you ‘service is our motto.’ It is? Isn’t profit the real motto? A dentist plucks your teeth...and sends you a bill saying, ‘for the professional services rendered.’ A member of the State Cabinet...calls himself or herself ‘minister’—servant whereas what he or she really enjoys i[s] power, *satta*, not *seva* (service).⁸⁶

These sentences follow directly upon Nirmal’s statement on service being essential to God’s nature. In juxtaposing these rather common and mundane meanings of service with Dalit service, he shows how far the Dalit experience has become removed from non-Dalit experience. Cleaning a latrine and removing the filth within is very different from plucking a tooth, running a store, or governing a country, and yet all are now seen to be ‘services.’ He concludes the paragraph with a ‘shock.’⁸⁷ He states:

Originally, the word *diakonia* was associated with the waiting at the table. The ‘Servant’ therefore, means a waiter. Our housemaid, or the sweeper who cleans the commodes and latrines are truly speaking our servants. Do we realize that? Let us be prepared for a further shock. Are we prepared to say that my housemaid, my sweeper, my *bhangi* is my God? Is precisely in this sense that our God is a servant God. He is a waiter, a dhobi, a *bhangi*.⁸⁸

This is a challenging statement, especially if one understands Nirmal’s words to be directed not only to a Dalit Christian audience, but to a non-Dalit Christian one as well. The critical reflection upon the Suffering Servant paradigm, which in Nirmal’s essay these passages intersperse and interrupt, has focused primarily on its potential impact—positive and negative—on Dalit persons and their psyches. However, if these

⁸⁶ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 64.

⁸⁷ The implications of this service’s revalidation are not limited to Dalit theology. One can think of many ways in ‘service’ has lost its shock, especially if one has had a recent encounter with ‘customer service.’ While the immediate context of this project is the Dalit context, it is good to keep in mind the ways in which our various contexts can be served also by a deeper understanding of service.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

passages are intended also, maybe even primarily, for non-Dalit Christians, then they provide a witness to Dalitness that such persons do not know or acknowledge.

Rhetorically, Nirmal disrupts service as it popularly understood particularly by persons who do shop at stores with mottos and who can go to the dentist. Moreover, he invokes the first person pronoun in the singular and plural—‘are we prepared to say that my housemaid, my sweeper, my bhangi is my God.’ Who is this we and who is this I? Nirmal routinely uses these pronouns to identify himself with the Dalit community, as he does in the sentence that follows immediately: ‘this means we [housemaids, sweepers, Dalits] have participated in this servant-God’s ministries.’ However, in this instance the ‘we’ are those who employ the housemaid, etc. Are ‘we’ prepared to see God’s Dalitness and God’s presence in the Dalit?

Nirmal does not reference Matthew 25:31-46, ‘Lord, when did we see you,’ but these passages are applicable and arguably present between the lines. Also present between the lines is Swami Vivekananda. While Nirmal’s use of *sevā* may or may not be a direct reference to Vivekananda, the term does mean ‘service’ and immediately follows a paragraph laden with Sanskrit, it bares striking similarity to Vivekananda’s *daridradevo, daridranarayana*, his charge to see God, *Nārāyaṇa*, in the poor and oppressed. Although the articulation of Dalit theology has never been merely for the Dalit community, Nirmal’s passage is one of the rare instances that a prophetic challenge is issued to the non-Dalit community that actively targets the foundations of caste ideology. Caste ideology shapes meaning and interprets experience through the lens of caste. He interrupts that epistemological process by providing an alternative way of seeing and

knowing the world. This work and this strategy are key components to Dalit service considered anew.

Nirmal also calls attention to the New Testament's notion of *diakonia*. This reference may offer another way to expand Dalit theology's own conception of service. He is correct that *diakonia* refers to table-service, and more generally services that attend to bodily needs.⁸⁹ The washing of feet—a service of hospitality and purification—and the actions of the Good Samaritan—offering material assistance to another/an-Other—are instances of *diakonia* as well. They are also practices that if transplanted to a caste-context are a direct challenge to Vivekananda's portrayal of the caste-obsessed practices that make Hinduism and Indian Christianity a 'religion of the kitchen' and a 'don't-touchism.'⁹⁰ It brings to the fore the caste-calculus that allows for certain intra-caste interactions to be permissible and others prohibited. In the example of foot washing, it transposes the locus of purification—the servant is the one who makes pure. From this narrow semantic range service at the table and to the body, the early church and later theologians continued to expand *diakonia* to include a host of ministries and charities that served the material and spiritual needs of the Church and the community. To be a servant is to model Jesus' servanthood in all its manifestations.

The following are six key dimensions of *diakonia* that W. Brandt identifies in the New Testament:

1) According to the message of Jesus, God's rule is a kingdom in which people are helped. Obedience to the Father leads to the neighbor. With God, ruling is ministering assistance, greatness becomes service. 2) Jesus is the Kingdom of

⁸⁹ C. Tatton, 'Some Studies on New Testament *Diakonia*,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 25.4 (1972): 428.

⁹⁰ These practices of service were radical and shocking in Jesus time, and can be radical and shocking in any context in which ideologies prevent authentic human relationships and partnerships to flourish.

God materialized. Matthew and Mark see the core of service in the giving of the Son of Man's life. Luke would have us view the whole work of Jesus as service. 3) The kind of *diakonia* that Jesus typified was a subtle blend of sovereignty and readiness for service, unity with the Father and solidarity with the suffering and guilty. 4) Jesus' *diakonia* is not treated in isolation: it is the basis and guideline of the disciples' activity. Jesus' message was of the coming Kingdom; only in him and not in the world is it realized. Loving service is therefore the hall-mark of waiting for that coming by his followers. 5) Paul was writing before the composition of the gospels, so his picture of Jesus was not filled with memoirs of the evangelists. Yet he preserves a similar diaconic view of the work and ways of Jesus. The apostle is the *diakonos* and *duolos* [slave] of Christ. 6) The Catholic Epistles witness to the early understanding of the way in which love of God and love of neighbor are invisibly bound in the suffering concern for the community.⁹¹

Brandt reveals the many layers of *diakonia* that are all rooted in Jesus' example, shot-through with love, stand in solidarity with the suffering and the guilty, and work for and wait on the Kingdom of God. *Diakonia* serves the *koinonia* (community) in which all are called to be co-partners with Christ and one another in liberation. *Diakonia* reveals each person to be both a subject and an object, a provider and a recipient of service, holistically existing in service to the flourishing of the community (in-common) and the advent of the Kingdom.⁹² As Manchala states, '*diakonia* is not another function of this *koinonia*. Rather being *koinonia* in Christ is the a way of doing *diakonia*. The kingdom is not only a vision and hope; it is a practice.'⁹³ What does this service mean and look like for the Dalit Christian community?

There is growing recognition that Dalit Christian liberation cannot be achieved apart from the broader Indian Church community, and that Dalit liberation cannot be achieved apart from non-Dalits. If a liberative social vision entails societal

⁹¹ W. Brandt, '*Der Dienst Jesu*' in *Der diakonische Amt der Kirche*, ed. H. Krim (Stuttgart: 1965). Summarized and translated by Tatton, 'Some Studies of New Testament *Diakonia*.' 427-8.

⁹² Here might be one area in which both Dalit theology and we could reflect comparatively and theologically with Vedānta Deśika's presentation on *bhāgavataśeṣatva* in which mutual acts of service, and joy, lead the community to deeper experiences of and in the Lord. See Francis X. Clooney, S.J., 'In Joyful Recognition.'

⁹³ Manchala, 'Expanding the Ambit,' 47.

transformation, then society necessarily will have to be transformed. For Dalit theology this means instilling within Dalit communities and non-Dalit communities alike a critical consciousness that awakens both to Dalit pathos and to the oppressive caste and economic exploitative structures that perpetuate it.⁹⁴ It means forming partnerships that are liberating and so can become liberative. By liberating, I mean partnerships that unshackle Dalit and non-Dalit communities from the binds of a casteist ideology that orders society, dictates relationships, and stunts human flourishing. Only in recognizing that caste ideology oppresses oppressor and oppressed, liberation can be achieved.

Dalit theology was correct in identifying that Dalit liberation entails two poles held in tension. Where the first generation slipped slightly was in emphasizing identity affirmation over liberative social vision, as if the former would necessarily lead to the latter. Instead, their advancement is mutual and gradual. By working towards societal transformation, identity becomes affirmed. Here ‘Dalitness’ as the experience of pathos is important. Affirming this aspect of Dalit identity awakens Dalit persons to the need for societal transformation, and as societal transformation unfolds—the advancement of liberation, but also in the stalls and retreats—new dimensions of identity, Dalit and non-Dalit are affirmed. The dialectic dances on so long as the right tune is played.

Dalit service then works towards both identity affirmation and a liberative social vision. It does so within the immediate Dalit community as well outside of it. It serves to bring about just relationships between persons, equitable economic relationships, an end to caste stigmatization, and the recovery and affirmation the humanity and dignity of all

⁹⁴ P. Dayanandan highlights this needed double liberation. Those who are oppressed require liberation from the forces that oppress them. Those who are the oppressors require liberation from the forces, ‘which keep them bonded to the various forms of oppression that they perpetuate.’ P. Dayanandan, ‘Who Needs a Liberation Theology,’ *Dalit International New Letter* 10.1 (1995): 8.

persons. Shifting away from service understood as dehumanizing occupations, service now becomes a humanizing vocation through which identity is affirmed and society transformed. And it begins as Dalit service. As Webster states:

God calls Christian Dalits to participate actively and even lead in the grass roots political struggle of all Dalits for the liberation God intends. In that struggle the church has proven to be weak, ineffective and often an instrument of caste oppression, even though it is predominantly Dalit in composition.⁹⁵

The *missio* Dalit images the *missio Dei* as Dalits serve the church and world. Importantly, this further affirms Dalit agency in actualizing their own liberation. Dalits are no longer construed merely as objects of charity, though charity, mercy, and compassion should not be abandoned. Instead, they are servants and ministers working actively for the betterment of their communities, church, country, and world. In their service, they provide also a prophetic service that calls all the church in India and abroad to serve alongside Dalits in their work for justice and the end of caste ideology.

Comparative Reflection

The comparative engagement between Dalit theology and Swami Vivekananda will become more apparent in the remaining sections. However, it was Vivekananda's reworking of *sevā* through a reflection on his immediate Indian context and Hindu theological and philosophical traditions that inspired this reflection on Dalit theology's understanding of service. That both talk about service and its importance for the theological and the social, albeit in different ways and with different meanings, was what

⁹⁵ Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 245. Rajkumar notes the subtle demographic shift that occurs when speaking about the Indian in the abstract. He states, 'the imagined identity of the Church seems to be predominantly 'non-Dalit,' which is perhaps why Dalit theologians have constantly identified the 'Church' as one which is *to stand in solidarity with* the Dalits. The very fact that Dalits constitute the majority of the Indian Church which makes their role in the Church's praxis crucial, is not adequately recognized. Therefore, nothing much has been said about the role of Dalits in their own liberation.

initially caught my attention, what Francis X. Clooney calls an ‘intuition of intriguing resemblance.’⁹⁶ The possible methodological and theological implications in rethinking service comparatively with Vivekananda are what held it. As we go forward I do not intend to collapse Vivekananda’s thinking upon Dalit theology, but instead aim to reflect upon Dalit theology’s understanding of service in a way similar to Vivekananda’s treatment of sevā. Vivekananda offers many theological and philosophical insights that will inform this project—points of congruity and incongruity—but most importantly he provides a way to expand sevā that faithfully serves his tradition and liberationally serves humanity. I hope that my treatment of service can do the same.

Identity: Dalitness Re-considered

At the center of Dalit theological reflection is Dalit identity, and at the center of Dalit identity is Dalit pathos. This pathos is a specific kind of suffering born from the particularities of Indian cultural, economic, and political practices as they relate to and participate in caste stigmatization and economic exploitation. Following and yet differentiating itself from Latin American liberation theology, Dalit theology asserts that before praxis and the critical reflection upon it there is pathos. That is before action, before reflection, there is pathos-experience. Like the Modern Dalit Movement, Dalit theology aims to give meaning to pathos. It does so not to provide a justification for pathos, but rather to make sense of it—to give words and expression to the experience. Only when this has been accomplished can Dalit theology advance forward towards praxis and theological reflection.

⁹⁶ Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning*, 10.

Second generation Dalit theologians are now questioning whether this emphasis on pathos has negative repercussions for its liberative potential. Although they recognize the necessity to identify Dalit pathos in all its particularity, they are concerned that pathos has become intrinsic to Dalit identity preventing the pathos experienced from becoming the pathos overcome. Furthermore, they see this essentialization limiting liberative partnerships, either through theological exclusivism or ideological projection. The result is a rupture in the methodological dialectic between identity affirmation and social transformation, which reverberates in Dalit theological praxis and reflection.⁹⁷ The question here is whether a complimentary identity can be affirmed—one that allows for Dalit experience in its particularity to remain, but also provides more direct opportunities for societal transformation.

Swami Vivekananda: The Individual, Social, and Ethical Implications of the Self's True Nature

Swami Vivekananda establishes his Practical Vedanta within an Advaita Vedanta framework. Although he frequently appeals to great advaitin Śaṅkara, it has been shown that he has also been influenced by a popular tradition of Advaita that he received from his master Ramakrishna. While this popular Advaita informs many aspects of Vivekananda's Vedānta, most notably his ethical turn, the principle of non-difference between the individual self (ātman) and the Supreme Self (Brahman) remains intact. He also understands the human predicament to be avidyā (ignorance) the repetitive

⁹⁷ Critical consciousness is the articulation of pathos, an awareness of the social institutions that maintain it, the realization that they can be transformed, and working out how that can be. Dalit discourse has excelled at aiding Dalits in the articulating their pathos and recognizing many of the structures that perpetuate oppressions and exploitation. There remains a need to further develop this last, crucial step that helps lead to liberation.

misperception and misapprehension of the individual's and world's true reality as Brahman. From ignorance arises *adhyāsa* (superimposition), which mistakes the infinite self for the finite mind-body complex (experientially conceived as the sense-organs of the body and the mind that processes those sensations and directs action accordingly). *Mokṣa* (liberation, self-realization) is realized traditionally through the exegetical study of Vedantic texts.⁹⁸ Vivekananda, however, emphasized the immediate experience brought about through a critical reflection on *sevā* in light of the *mahāvākyas* (great sayings, e.g. *tat tvam asi* [That you are]) and *bhakti* devotionism.

Although one can trace out and so stitch together Vivekananda's advaitic framework across his many lectures, he often practically and matter-of-factly presents Advaita's ontology so as to highlight its liberative psychological and ethical relevancy. He is particularly concerned with how ignorance manifests itself in the individual and the community. Within the individual he sees this ignorance leading to a host of problems: doubt, fear, self-loathing, superstition. Within the community these individual problems are expressed collectively: division, prejudice, and privilege. Liberating knowledge—discriminating the self from non-self and realizing the self to be Self—has social as well as soteriological implications.

In accordance with Advaita's ontology, liberation is not a state that one achieves, but instead a realization of who one truly is. One is not transformed into *ātman* or Brahman; one already is *ātman* and Brahman. Ignorance in the form of superimposition

⁹⁸ This study usually consists of three steps: 1) *śravaṇa* (hearing, close study with assistance from a qualified instructor), 2) *manana* (reflective thinking, thinking in order to remove all doubts in the Advaita thesis, as well as advancing one's own argument in support of that thesis) and 3) *nididhyāsana* (contemplative meditation which strengthens the belief reached through the first two stages and culminates in the intuitive experience of one's identity with the *Brahman*. Bina Gupta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy: Perspectives on Reality, Knowledge, and Freedom* (New York: Rutledge, 2012), 237.

veils this truth, and so individuals behave in self-interest and groups in group-interest.

Before an Indian audience in a lecture titled ‘Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life,’

Vivekananda weaves these themes together. He states:

The more I read the Upanishads, my friends, my countrymen, the more I weep for you, for therein is the great practical application. Strength, strength for us. What we need is strength, who will give us strength...And the Upanishads are the great mine of strength. Therein lies strength enough to invigorate the whole world; the whole world can be vivified, made strong, energized through them. They will call with trumpet voice upon the weak, the miserable, and the downtrodden of all races, all sects to stand on their feet and be free. Freedom, physical freedom, mental freedom, and spiritual freedom are the watchwords of the Upanishads. Ay, this is the one scripture in the world, of all others, that does not talk of salvation, but of freedom. Be free from the bonds of nature, be free from weakness! And it shows to you that you have this freedom already in you.⁹⁹

In this first quotation, one can see the ways in Vivekananda takes Advaita’s teaching on the ātman’s true and ultimate freedom and applies it to the individual and community. It is more a psychological and morale boosting speech targeted to a colonized and unsure people than it is a metaphysical treatise, and yet it is underpinned by Vivekananda’s understanding of Advaita—the Upanishads reveal this truth about the individual. Vivekananda is not without precedent as he resembles Krishna providing his initial instruction to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. Courage and strength come from the realization of one’s innate freedom and immortality. This is one dimension of Practical Vedanta, the ability to sustain, strengthen, encourage, and so liberate the individual who is suffering emotionally, physically, and existentially in ignorance. The second quotation from the same speech, presents the ethical dimensions of Practical Vedanta. He states:

The second great idea which the world is waiting to receive from our Upanishads is the solidarity of this universe. The old lines of demarcation and differentiation are vanishing rapidly...Our Upanishads say that the cause of all misery is ignorance; and that is perfectly true when applied to every state of life; either

⁹⁹ *CWSV* 3: 238, ‘Vedanta in its Application to Indian Life,’ (1897)

social or spiritual. It is ignorance that makes us hate each other, it is through ignorance that we do not love each other...the cry of morality is coming also, and that is to be found in our books. The explanation of morality, the fountain of ethics, that also the world wants; and that it will get here.¹⁰⁰

Ignorance is now also the failure to realize the ethical implications of Practical Vedanta's understanding of non-difference. Having realized non-difference between the individual self and Supreme Self, the individual returns from that experience with an awareness of non-difference with all selves. As seen in his presentation of Vedanta and *sevā*, morality has its foundation in the recognition of non-difference and the divinity of fellow selves.

The perpetuation of difference in its more nefarious forms of prejudice and privilege, caste oppression and material exploitation, show ignorance's pervasiveness and perseverance. Importantly, as we will see in Vivekananda's views on epistemology and praxis, societal transformation accompanies spiritual liberation. Just as ignorance conditions the individual to see and understand the world through difference, desire, and aversion, Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta and *sevā* supply a counter-conditioning: non-difference, devotion, and renunciation. Furthermore, the work towards realization and liberation entails societal transformation, as the individual learns to see the Supreme Self present in others and in one's own self through *sevā*. Though both processes can be gradual and seem uncertain, Vivekananda possesses the utmost confidence in their inevitability. It is the true nature of reality, an identity affirmed—realized or not.

Although a century separates them and their contexts are different, Vivekananda can be seen to be taking up a similar fight for his people as does Dalit theology does for

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 240-1. Vivekananda also continues to encourage his countrymen and women by noting that Hinduism possesses the truth that the world needs. This is powerful affirmation of Indian religion in the face of colonial and missionary critique.

the Dalits. His presentation of Practical Vedanta to the India masses, which called for them to realize their true identity, was a call also for them to realize a true Hinduism. Here he employs a similar strategic essentialism in his construction of Hinduism (Practical Vedanta) as Dalit theology does in the construction of Dalitness. At one level it functions as a response to the Western and missionary critiques that Hinduism lacked an ethics, was superstitious, idolatrous, and polytheistic. To this audience Vivekananda provided an essential Hinduism that was none of these things, and in fact was older, more established, more spiritual, more ethical, and more unified than Christianity. To his fellow countrymen and women he also presented an essential Hinduism. One that appropriated the missionary critique, but now as a call to the nation to recover the essence of their tradition. While his words could be sharp, Vivekananda's synthetic understanding of Vedanta perhaps softened the blow. Though his more orthodox critiques challenged him on some of these positions, he gave as good as he got.

This strategic essentialism helps also to make sense of Vivekananda's call for all persons to become Brahmins, and so problematizes an essentialized bipolarity between Dalit and Brahmin. Vivekananda had strong admonishments for the Brahmins of his day, whom he saw as treading upon the neck of the masses and as desirous to maintain their misbegotten prestige and power. The true Brahmin did possess prestige and power, but as the storehouse of knowledge and the keepers of the tradition. However, prejudice and privilege had kept that storehouse closed off from the rest of community. Practical Vedanta aimed to make this liberating knowledge accessible to all persons, Dalits and non-Dalits alike. Here the spiritual and social dimensions of *sevā* are seen as response to these two forms of poverty.

Dalit Theology: Dalitness and the *imago Dei*

For the construction of Dalit identity, Dalit theology has plumbed the depths of Dalit pathos to reveal to Dalits and non-Dalits the dehumanizing miseries suffered by Dalit persons and communities. This pathos is foundational for Dalit theological reflection as it is what makes Dalit theology Dalit, Dalit hope Dalit, and Dalit liberation Dalit. In proposing the *imago Dei* as a theological, anthropological, and Christological resource, I do so not with the intention of supplanting pathos, but instead to contribute to a more expansive understanding of Dalitness that complements pathos experienced with pathos overcome. As Nirmal states:

The Dalit consciousness should realize that the ultimate goal of its liberation movement cannot be the ‘land flowing with milk and honey.’ For a Christian Dalit theology i[t] cannot be simply the gaining of rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or conversely, our full divinity, the ideal of the [*i*]mago Dei of God in us. To use another biblical metaphor, our goal is the ‘glorious liberty of the children of God.’¹⁰¹

Nirmal provides a glimpse at what a liberative social vision looks like theologically. The social and political dimensions are present in the pursuit of rights, reservations, and privileges to which Dalit Christians and Muslims still have not been granted access.¹⁰² However, he continues on to point to the theological anthropological dimension as well: the realization of Dalit humanity and, through the *imago Dei*, Dalit divinity. Liberative

¹⁰¹ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 63.

¹⁰² In ‘Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,’ Nirmal offers another example of Dalit theology’s liberative social vision. This one compliments the one above by focusing more precisely on the social and political. He states, ‘Moving forward from pathos to history, Dalit theology must also ‘see’ a transforming liberative social vision. The greatest dalit leader, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar wanted such a liberative social to be based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Such a liberating social vision must transform our social structures and make them egalitarian. A vision of Dalit Theology must also transform our ecclesiastical structures and must strive to usher in God’s *shalom*.’ Nirmal, ‘Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,’ 144.

social visions conceived in this way make Dalit Christian theology Christian, but not exclusively so.

There is an understandable concern within Dalit theology regarding the introduction of a substantive identity other than Dalit, especially one that purports to expand or complement Dalitness. This stems from the legitimate worry that an identity more broadly construed opens the door to cooption and domination. That is the Dalitness of Dalit theology will be lost in the generic appeal to an identity more essential to Dalit persons and shared by all persons. The *imago Dei* would be one such identity. Though the Christological dimensions will be discussed below, Jesus Christ as the ‘paradigm [uncreated] *imago Dei*’ through the Incarnation affirms in his humanity the importance of context and particularity.¹⁰³ His life, ministry, and even his death are informed by his being a Jewish male from Nazareth living under Roman occupation in the 1st c. CE. Rather than a negation of particularity, the Incarnation is an affirmation of it.

The *imago Dei* enjoys a long, if not always central, place in Judeo-Christian theology. Beginning with the Priestly author of Genesis 1, through the Greek and Latin fathers, the Scholastics, the Reformers, and today in various theological schools, including contextual and liberation, the *imago Dei* points to the ways in which humanity images, mirrors, and participates in the divine. With the brevity of the passage and the plurivocity of the terms image (*selem*) and likeness (*dēmût*), the concept was and remains

¹⁰³ J. Richard Middleton, ‘The Liberating Image? Interpreting the Imago Dei in Context,’ *Christian Scholars Review* 24.1 (1994): 24. This is earlier, focused version of Middleton’s monograph, which provides an in depth historical-critical analysis of the *imago Dei* in Genesis and in comparison the to its Ancient Near East context. The article, unlike the monograph, offers a brief treatment of relevant New Testament passages. Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 17.

ripe for interpretation.¹⁰⁴ J. Richard Middleton surveys the historical treatment of image and likeness, stating:

As blissfully unconcerned with authorial intent as any post-structuralist critic, most medieval and modern interpreters have typically asked not an exegetical, but a speculative, question: In what way are humans like God and unlike animals? In answer to this question, various candidates have been suggested for the content of image. These range from human reason, through conscience, immortality, and spirituality, to freedom and personhood...there has been, however, a significant minority reading of the image which has attempted to substitute for the metaphysical, substantialistic a dynamic, relational one.¹⁰⁵

Given his rootedness in Scripture—Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament—as well as the counter-ideological and liberative potential of his presentation, my treatment of the *imago Dei* will build upon Middleton’s solid foundation.

Having offered a brief survey of the *imago Dei*’s historical interpretation through Christian history, Middleton returns to its source in Genesis 1 to explore how its recovery might help inform theology today. He concludes, along ‘with a virtual consensus among Old Testament scholars,’ that the *imago Dei*, biblically speaking, concerns ‘the royal function or office of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world, given authorized power to share in God’s rule over the earth’s resources and creatures.’¹⁰⁶

Within the Ancient Near East (ANE) context out of which Genesis 1 emerges, Genesis 1’s *imago Dei* would stand not only in stark contrast Egyptian and Babylonian conceptions, but embedded within it is a polemical, counter-ideological, and liberating

¹⁰⁴ Gen 1: 26-28 (NRSV): Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’/ So God created humankind in his image,/ in the image of God he created them;/ male and female he created them./ God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

¹⁰⁵ Middleton, ‘The Liberating Image?’, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Middleton, ‘The Liberating Image?’, 12. (de-italicized from the original).

intent.¹⁰⁷ In these ANE empires the pharaoh or king held this divinely appointed, intermediary position between the gods and the rest of humanity; he, and he alone, represented the gods ‘as their son and image.’¹⁰⁸

Against this backdrop, Genesis 1 adopts the ANE *imago Dei* only then to dismantle its innate hierarchy by ‘democratizing [ANE] royal ideology’ and extending the image to include all humans, men and women.¹⁰⁹ This reworking of the *imago Dei* informs Israel’s call to be ‘holy nation,’ a ‘kingdom of priests’ (Ex 19:3-6), figures into its iconoclasm, and its anti-monarchical stance (it is the peoples’ desire to be like other nations that leads to Saul, a wish that God acquiesces to). Through Genesis’ understanding of the *imago Dei*, the people required no intermediary to stand between them and God, needed no idols as they were ‘God’s living cult statues on earth,’ and wanted for no king as they were created in God’s royal likeness.¹¹⁰ This image provides a radical reframing of the ANE social structure, and as this image applies to all humans it possesses a specially liberative potency for all persons living under oppressive, hierarchical systems.

Moving from the Hebrew Scriptures to the New Testament, Middleton shows the ways in which the *imago Dei* as a ‘rule’ continues to be carried on by and nuanced within the early Christian community. Jesus as God incarnate reveals the precise way one is to be if he or she wishes to represent God authentically. In Jesus we see a shift away from rule and royalty and towards compassionate service and the cross. Jesus proclaims, ‘for

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Middleton, *The Liberating Image?*, 207. (monograph). Here Middleton quotes Walter Brueggemann, ‘There is only one way God is imaged in the world, only one: humanness!’ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as ransom for many' (Mk 10:42-45).¹¹¹ Service and suffering, not dissimilar to Dalit theology's own Christological paradigm, point the way for the community to image God as Christ perfectly images God. The Church, 'the body of Christ,' who remembers his life, ministry, death, and resurrection is called to follow Christ in service and compassion. In doing so, the Church re-members the *imago Dei* through '*imitatio Christi*.'¹¹²

Middleton concludes:

What ties together this whole trajectory from Genesis 1 to the New Testament is the consistent biblical insight that humanity from the beginning and now the church as the redeemed humanity—is both *gifted* by God with royal status and dignity and *called* by God actively to represent [God's] Kingdom... Humanity created in God's image—and the church as the renewed *imago Dei*—is called and empowered to God's multi-sided prism in the world, reflecting and refracting the Creators brilliant light into a rainbow of cultural activity and socio-political patterns that scintillates with the glory of God's presence and manifest [God's] reign of justice.¹¹³

In light of Middleton's historical-critical reflection on Genesis 1:26-8, one may say that the Priestly authors' account of God creating humanity in God's image and likeness is a critical theological reflection on pathos in light of the Word.¹¹⁴ Although Middleton's presentation of the *imago Dei* lacks, deliberately, the metaphysics and speculation that accompanies many other 'image'/'likeness' theologies, his provides a tangible model that is rooted in Scripture and possesses tremendous counter-ideological

¹¹¹ Middleton provides a transformative image of the cross as throne in Mark's Gospel. Following the theological and narrational device of the author, Middleton shows how the cross as throne is the ultimate flipping of the royal, rule paradigm. Christ on the cross, a robber on either side, is the royal court (as the notice above his head reads his crime: The King of the Jews). It also is a powerful statement on discipleship, as Mark presents James and John arguing to be allowed 'to sit on the right and the other at your left in [Christ's] glory' (Mark 10:37). Service and the cross mark Christ's kingship. Middleton, 'The Liberating Image?', 23. (article).

¹¹² Ibid., 24.

¹¹³ Ibid., 24-5.

¹¹⁴ See also Psalm 137 (By the Rivers of Babylon) for a different kind of pathos infused reflection composed during or immediately following the exile.

and liberative potential. Moreover, in its own changing contextual situatedness (from Babylonian exile to Roman occupation), it demonstrates how communities across the globe can image God and the Kingdom in their own particular, authentically liberative ways.¹¹⁵

Despite the relative paucity of Scriptural references to humanity being created in the image and likeness of God, the *imago Dei* has enjoyed a remarkable number and a wide range of reflections throughout the centuries. Sitting at the doctrinal crossroads, it is perhaps best understood and best reflected upon through many theological lenses and voices. A robust conception of it is capable of providing a statement on anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, Trinitarian thought, ecclesiology, soteriology, and eschatology. However, at its most immediate, it is a statement about identity, about who we are. The *imago Dei* posits an inextricable dignity within humanity that even when distorted by one's own sin or denied by the sin of another is never forfeited or lost. As Dalit theology plumbs the depths of pathos it would do well to plumb also the depths of this humanizing and liberating dignity.

For Dalit theology the *imago Dei* does not replace Dalit pathos, but it does replace it within a potentially more liberative framework. The existential, not to mention the physical and psychological, burden that accompanies pathos steadily strips away one's sense of subjectivity and agency rendering persons as mere objects of oppression

¹¹⁵ Authentic both to the *imago Dei* and one's own context. Dominic Robinson's recent work *Understanding the "Imago Dei": The Thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann* demonstrates the benefit of bringing into conversation many different theological reflections on the *imago Dei*. His effort towards creating both an ecumenical understanding of the *imago Dei* and one capable of speaking to the present global context is a helpful model for this kind of synthetic construction. Owing to the various emphases and starting points of these various scholars, one can see a broader view of the *imago Dei* when they are all brought together. The inclusion of even more voices, especially from the global South, will continue to help shape the image of humanity and divinity. Dominic Robinson, *Understanding the "Imago Dei": The Thought of Barth, von Balthasar and Moltmann* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2011).

and charity. The *imago Dei* affirms the essential subjectivity, humanity, and dignity of all individuals as they image God and are called by God to be co-partner's with God in Christ and with one another in all God's liberative service in the world. And it does so not from a place of security and exaltation, but from a place of exile and persecution. In Genesis 1:26-8, all of humanity is granted the agency to represent the *regnum Dei*, the Kingdom of God; in Jesus, humanity sees with greater clarity how to be that divine representative better. As Dwight Hopkins states, 'All peoples are involved in a healthy theological anthropology. They are made in God's image (*imago dei*) and are equally called to pursue the *missio dei* (mission of God).' ¹¹⁶

Both Genesis 1:26-8 and Jesus provide models for thinking about identity. They also provide models for compassionate and liberative service—service filled with pathos and working towards liberation. With this identity comes responsibility. The 'gift' and the 'call' go hand in hand, and they mutually inform and transform (perfect) one another as the process of realization unfolds. From a Christian theological perspective, from the beginning of history to its end, humanity is gifted this representative identity and called to represent/serve the Kingdom faithfully and dutifully. Revelation makes known God's continuous affirmation of this human identity and God's continued demonstration of how to represent God's Kingdom correctly. The covenant, the prophets, Christ, and the vivifying, sanctifying work of the Spirit make known what this representation and participation entails, aphoristically conveyed in Jesus' response 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself' (Lk 10:27). Compassionate and liberative

¹¹⁶ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 159.

service emerges from this three-dimensional love among God, neighbor, and oneself, challenging, correcting, transforming, perfecting, and calling all to work in service.

Comparative Reflection

The ontological foundations differ significantly and importantly between Swami Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta and Dalit theology. The language of image '*imago*' and likeness '*similitudo*' that are central to a Christian theological anthropology's understanding of the relationship between humanity and God are only conventionally present in Vivekananda's Vedanta since God is only with difficulty present in Advaita. They are perhaps most closely presented in Vivekananda's synthetic understanding, but here they serve an epistemological function. His comment on the *Taittiriya Upanishad* 1.1.11.2, in which the student is told to see his parents, etc. as God, establishes a perception of likeness that ultimately will be overcome as *sevā*'s practice advances towards advaita. In the end, image and likeness (*sāmya*/sameness) lacks the same theistic force.¹¹⁷ While recognizing this difference, Vivekananda's understanding of humanity's true identity draws attention to two important features of the *imago Dei* for both Dalit and non-Dalit theology.

According to Vivekananda, the world as we perceive it and we as we perceive ourselves are marked by difference. However, difference is not ultimately real, rather it is manifested by ignorance through superimposition—the human predicament. At the intra-

¹¹⁷ See *CWSV* 4:356, 'What We Believe In,' (Kidi; Chicago, 3.3.1894). In advaita, the principle of non-difference operates at the ontological, essential level. The perception of difference owes to the accidental characteristic of things, which are differentiated by name and form. As a clay pot is different in name and form both a clay plate and a lump of clay, they all, nevertheless share 'clay-ness' as their substantive nature. For a comparative theological reflection in which the traditions (Christianity and Śrīvaiṣṇavism) present a greater similitude see Francis X. Clooney, S. J., '*Imago Dei, Paramaṃ Sāmyam*: Hindu Light on a Traditional Christian Theme,' *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 12.3 (2008).

personal level, differentiation leads to social division, which is further reified by privilege and prejudice. The failure to know who we truly are—self (ātman) and Self (Brahman) results in a system of meaning-making that erroneously attempts to supply that identity and preserve it through (false)-self interested activities. In light of this social dimension, Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta understands right knowledge to be both liberating soteriologically and socially. The method of this realization will be discussed in the next section. Here, most importantly, is that ignorance does not change what we are, just as liberation does not. We are always liberated, we just do not know it. Social liberation, in the form of societal transformation, issues forth from the beginning of this realization as division, privilege, and prejudice are confronted by the ultimate truth of non-difference.

The liberating truth of the *imago Dei* is that it is an identity—the true identity—given by God and shared by all persons. Sin, individual and social, distorts, strips at, and obscures this essential attribute of humanity, but it is never lost. The impact of the Fall and the introduction of sin rightfully and necessarily problematizes any statement on being created in the image and likeness of God—as this creative act precedes the Fall. The functional model that Middleton advances, with its foundation in the Biblical context from which the *imago Dei* arises, correctly shifts the effects of the Fall away from the 'image' (identity) and towards the way we 'image' (activity)—from noun to verb, essence to act. A royal representative may not be a good representative, but he or she is a representative nevertheless. Revelation and grace correct and perfect the activity of imaging, allowing us to be/image better the image we are made to be.

For Dalit theology the *image Dei* provides an invaluable resource for liberative reflection. Recalling Nirmal's statement, the goal of Dalit theology is not limited to the

securing reservations and rights. Its first objective is ‘the realization of our full humanness or conversely, our full divinity, the ideal of the [*i*]*imago Dei* of God in us.’ Leaving aside the notion of full divinity, which could be explored in related theological statements like divinization and sanctification, for Dalit theology this realization is the ultimate identity affirmation—affirmed by Dalits and confirmed by God. Moreover, it is something to be realized, and not something to be achieved like reservations. That is, it is an identity already inherent to Dalit persons, to all persons. This leads to the second, a more practical and pragmatic, insight from Vivekananda—the way in which the assertion of true identity, despite remaining for the moment unrealized, provides a needed affirmation of truth in the face of its constant perceived negation.

Throughout his many speaking engagements, especially those in India, Vivekananda demonstrates the physical, psychological, and spiritual liberative potency present in an identity grounded in and affirmed by the divine. His repeated exclamation, ‘*tat tvam asi*,’ was offered to embolden the individual to awaken to his or her truest and most authentic being—to possess the courage to be. For Dalit theology, the *imago Dei* offers a similar statement. Though not wanting to reduce either simply to an inspirational slogan, they are a promise to those desiring liberation that there is a way to attain it. If Vivekananda’s liberation can be understood to be ‘accomplishing the accomplished,’ then Dalit theology’s and Christian theology’s can be located in the already/not yet realization of *imago Dei* and Kingdom of God. How this realization takes place will be discussed in the next section.

Dalit Theology: Epistemology, Praxis, and Liberation

Rajkumar highlights the dialectical relationship between Dalit theology's objectives—identity affirmation and social liberative vision—and its approaches—liberative partnerships/agency for liberation. The fruit, content of Dalit theological reflection arises from this 'praxiological framework.'¹¹⁸ After presenting and critiquing aspects of Dalit theology's 'articulation'—methodology and content—he concludes that Dalit theology may contribute to the curtailing of its own praxis-potential.¹¹⁹ In light of both Rajkumar's observation and his and other second-generation Dalit theologians' work, I have presented a few areas in Dalit theology's articulation that may benefit from a reevaluation. These include many of the same categories that Rajkumar, Clarke, Peacock, Manchala and others have identified as well—Dalit identity, agency, and methodology. This concluding section looks at two interrelated and key components of Dalit theology—epistemology and praxis—and how maintaining the dialectic between these may benefit Dalit theology's overall praxiological framework.

Following the lead of Nirmal, Dalit theology's epistemology is grounded in *pathos*—experience. Pathos provides the foundation for knowing in general and knowing God in particular—because it is the *a priori* experience that exists before and is 'more certain than any principle, proposition, thought, or action.'¹²⁰ Knowledge begins in pathos, and while Dalit epistemology acknowledges other valid means of knowing, Scripture, tradition, popular religiosity, their import is read through and made known by this pain-experience. To further clarify the particularity of Dalit-pathos and knowing,

¹¹⁸ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 43.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 72.

¹²⁰ Nirmal, 'Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective,' 141. Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 49.

Nirmal establishes a tripartite epistemology that spirals out from pathetic knowing to include empathetic and sympathetic knowing. This softens Dalit theology's methodological exclusivism, others can know pathos in limited ways, but establishes the ultimate primacy of Dalit pathos—it is the rubric through which all other pathos' experiences are graded.¹²¹

From this base of experiential knowing, Dalit theology encounters revelation and reflects upon it through this lens. Nirmal states, 'it is the common dalit experience of Christian dalits along with other dalits that will shape Christian theology.'¹²² Its content reflects this base as it discovers and encounters the Dalitness of God and Jesus. In its reading of Scripture, Dalit theology lifts up the Deuteronomic Creed and the Suffering Servant to be paradigmatic texts in articulating the theological, Christological dimensions of faith.¹²³

Pathos also necessarily informs Dalit theological praxis, used most often by Dalit theology to mean activity or practice. Building upon the Modern Maharashtran movements, Dalit theology appropriated Ambedkar's slogan 'Educate, Organize, and Agitate,' and much of its early development followed this model. Dalit theologians sought to educate themselves, Dalit communities, and the church on the plight of Dalits—carrying over the Dalit Movement's work in conscientization. They organized colleagues, conferences, and coalitions building a base of Dalit theologians and expanding the reach of the movement's work. And they agitated politically and

¹²¹ Given Nirmal's emphasis on the particularity of Dalit pathos and the extremeness of that particularity, it is unclear whether he would grant Dalit pathos a sympathetic way of knowing in relation to say black pathos.

¹²² Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit theology,' 59.

¹²³ The Deuteronomic Creed possesses elements of the Exodus paradigm favored by many contextual and liberation theologies, but also presents, according to Nirmal, a better account of Dalit pathos and so further differentiates Dalit theology from these other theologies.

theologically against the casteist-ideology and the sway it held over the church and society.

However, perhaps on account of Dalit theology's efforts to differentiate itself from Latin American liberation theology and its grammar, praxis itself remained a rather underdeveloped concept within the first generation. As foundational, all critical reflection occurred through the lens of pathos, but as essential, pathos was itself not able to undergo transformation. It existed outside the hermeneutical circle, informing the reflection but never being informed by it. Rajkumar's use of 'liberative potential' gets to the heart of the praxiological problem. The aim of a purposeful action is to actualize a potential, in this case the work towards Dalit liberation. His concern is that the way in which Dalit theology has been articulated 'does not offer adequate scope for engagement in praxis.'¹²⁴ Dalits themselves, the church, non-Dalit sympathizers, and the government, potential actors and partners in the work towards Dalit liberation, have not been actualized as Dalit theology has provided them little agency, purpose, or voice.

That the first generation's articulation of Dalit theology did not create many opportunities for such engagement does not mean that Dalit theology did not nor does not intend such engagement. The hope that a liberative social vision can be realized, presupposes the potential actualization of liberative partnerships. If it did not, Dalit theology would have ceased to be, having died in some seminar room in 1984. A deepening liberative partnership with the church remains one of the primary goals of Dalit theology to which there has been limited success.¹²⁵ However, the way the church is

¹²⁴ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 177.

¹²⁵ It is important to acknowledge the positive responses the churches have made at various institutional levels to Dalit theology's challenge. However, they have been limited and casteism still permeates many churches and Christian communities.

conceived remains abstract and problematic. Despite acknowledging that the church is primarily Dalit and critiquing the church for failing to realize this itself, Dalit theology views the church infrastructurally rather than popularly. Rajkumar notes, ‘the imagined identity of the Church seems to be predominantly “non-dalit,” which is perhaps why Dalit theologians have constantly identified the ‘Church’ as one which *is to stand in solidarity with the Dalits.*’¹²⁶

Extra-ecclesially, one can ask what is the significance for Dalit theology that the majority of Dalits are not Christian? Clarke’s work, which reflects upon Dalit religiosity, offers a needed theological correction to the way Dalit Christian theology thinks about its Dalitness. To push the question two-steps further, what does it mean for Dalit Christian theology that majority of Indians are Hindu, and how does this impact its understanding of both liberative social vision and liberative partnerships? These are difficult and so important questions as Dalit theology moves into and beyond the early 21st c. This final section is also the final comparative turn in the project, and it explores how epistemology and especially praxis might be reconsidered in light of Vivekananda’s epistemology and praxis.

Swami Vivekananda: Experiential Epistemology and Liberative Sevā

From very early on his spiritual development, Vivekananda placed a great deal of importance on religious experience. As a young man he was in constant search for person who could claim to have seen God and could help him have that same experience. His search ended at the feet of Sri Ramakrishna, who when asked the question replied, ‘Yes, I have seen God. I see Him as I see you here, only more clearly,’ and whose touch induced

¹²⁶ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 60.

within Vivekananda a state of *samādhi*. Religious experience became Vivekananda's primary source for valid knowledge. He viewed the Vedas to be written testimonies of this experience, and granted authority to the Upanishads because they were able to relate this experience as well. However, he found the traditional modes of textual study to be impractical: 'mental gymnastics' done apart from the world and limited to a select few possessing the necessary qualifications and time.

Although Vivekananda did not advocate Mīmāṃsā-like exegetical practices, he was not completely a-textual. The synthetic side of his Vedānta emerged from a reading of the Upanishads in which he discerned a ladder-like progression from Dvaita to Viśiṣṭādvaita to finally Advaita. Moreover, because he trusted in Vedānta's liberative efficacy—verified in his own experiences of non-difference—he was content to present and explain only small, but for him sufficient portions of the text—the *mahāvākyas*—that provided the essential teachings of Vedānta in a few words—'you are that,' 'I am Brahman.' His instructions were often even shorter, a simple, single imperative: 'to hear,' 'to say,' 'to think,' 'to know,' 'to realize.' Through the constant repetition of these statements and an attunement to the experiential impact on one's self, anyone could gradually or rapidly advance towards liberation.

The practical and synthetic elements of his Vedānta come together in his teaching on *sevā*. *Sevā* too was grounded in Vivekananda's religious experience. His experiences of non-difference included both an ascent into unity with the divine and descent into unity with the world and all persons. This rise and return was coupled with an experience at Cape Comorin, where he was able to resolve his inner-conflict between being a renunciant apart from the world and being a renunciant in the world. He chose the latter.

In bringing together a band of sanyassins and householders, Vivekananda established an organization and a program of sevā that sought to bring material and spiritual relief to the Indian masses. It was, in many ways, the perfect solution to his conflict as it allowed for liberation to be pursued in the world.

Sevā provides a practice for inculcating an experience of non-difference through devotional service offered to the poor and oppressed. It possesses both social and spiritual implications, and due to its foundation in Practical Vedanta neither individual liberation nor social transformation can be reduced to simply being the means to the other's end. Instead, each is concomitant to the other: no one is truly free until all are free. While ignorance veils all the dimensions of non-difference—non-difference between the individual and divine and non-difference between individuals—sevā works towards this realization recognizing that the primary and most pernicious obstructions to the awareness of non-difference are the differences we project upon one another. The example of the enlightened Śaṅkara becoming discombobulated by the approach of a Dalit shows how even the most adept can fall back into the social conventions that maintain stratified difference.

Sevā counters the conventional reality of difference through the gradual arrival to the ultimate reality of non-difference, and it begins with a radical reversal of conventional expectations: to serve and to see God in the poor. Within this framework, it is only in the recognition of the divinity in another that one can realize the divinity within oneself. Vivekananda builds upon what he recognizes to be humanity's need for devotional support, an object towards which one can direct his or her worship, and so sevā begins in the difference between the server and the served. The first identity affirmed is that of the

other in whom the divine is made known through the act of service. Difference collapses into sameness as the advaitic statements of Vedānta allow for non-difference between server and served to be established. The final moment of realization is the turn back to one's self in which the non-difference between the served and the divine and the non-difference between the server and the served logically affirms the server's own non-difference with the divine. Each step entails a different experience of non-difference that culminates in the liberative experience of non-difference with ātman and Brahman.

Societal transformation accompanies spiritual liberation, and helps to protect sevā from becoming purely an individual undertaking. First, material, charitable support for the poor figures largely in Vivekananda's approach, and one of his great contributions to India was the establishment of wide reaching, well organized centers for relief. Recalling Ramakrishna's adage that 'an empty stomach is no good for religion,' this social dimension has spiritual implications as material support opens the way for the one served to work towards the experience of non-difference. Second, he made available the truths of Vedanta to those whom otherwise would not have had the opportunity to encounter them. The aim of practical and synthetic Vedanta was to provide these liberative teachings to the masses. Third, the teachings on non-difference granted dignity to the poor, outcaste, and marginalized in Indian society. It allowed for and called for all people to recognize liberating and liberative potential they possessed. Fourth, though not entirely the same, sevā promotes a kind of conscientization as the implications of Vivekananda's teachings on non-difference challenged the privilege and prejudice of his day—a strategic corrective to Hinduism as it was perceived and practiced. Though he qualified his condemnation of caste so as not to be identified as a caste destroyer, he did so in a way

that left his understanding of caste nearly incommensurable with casteist ideology: all persons were to become Brahmins, and it was the duty of the Brahmins to make this a reality.

Alongside the social arm of the Ramakrishna Mission, which extends out in the many service organizations established and run by the community, is the Mission's spiritual arm. Following Practical Vedanta's aim to make accessible the liberating truths of Vedānta, the mission provides quality translations of many Sanskrit—high-caste—texts. This allows those who cannot read Sanskrit to study and to encounter by themselves, or alongside an instructor from the Ramakrishna Math, texts they otherwise could not access. Moreover, it also opens the door to non-elite appropriations of the Vedānta instead of their dismissal. Given Vivekananda's emphasis on experience over exegesis, many of the obstacles that would prevent one from studying these classics—including qualification—are circumvented by the Ramakrishna Community itself. Vivekananda's strategically essentialized understanding of Hinduism to be thoroughly inclusive again challenges simple binaries, but here it does so in a way that opens Hinduism's books both literally and figuratively.

An important question to raise here at the conclusion is whether sevā reduces the poor and oppressed to instruments for another's liberation—who is serving whom? The reply that the poor are receiving material and even spiritual benefit is not an entirely sufficient response as they remain objects, though now divine objects, of charity. Ultimately, these differences are overcome in the realization of each individual's true nature—there is no subject-object dichotomy because there is no true dichotomy. This too is somewhat unsatisfying. It is a difficult question with no easy response, and one that

challenges all persons who perform service locally or abroad to examine their intentions and motivations. Again, it is important to remember Vivekananda's context, and the necessary limitations that accompany it. This is not an apologetic nor need there be one. Vivekananda's understanding of sevā provides many good, and I think potentially liberative, thoughts for Dalit theology to think with and think through.

Dalit Theology and Liberative Service

Given the observed disconnect between aspects of Dalit theology's articulation and its praxiological framework—identity affirmation/liberative social vision and liberative partnerships—a reconceived notion of Dalit service may be both beneficial to Dalit theology and liberative for the Dalit community. Rajkumar would call this a question of 'practical efficacy.'¹²⁷ As Dalit theology understands itself to be contextual and liberational, it is also practical and so transformational. James Massey states:

When Dalit theologians speak of Dalit theology, they are in fact making an affirmation about the need for theological expression which will help them in their search for daily bread and their struggle to overcome a situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy, and the denial of human dignity and identity.¹²⁸

Likewise, M. E. Prabhakar states Dalit theology is 'not only a prophetic theology for identification with the oppression of Dalits and their struggles for equality and justice [but it is also] a political theology for social action towards the transformation of injustice, undemocratic, and oppressive structures.'¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 1.

¹²⁸ James Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), 63. Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Liberation*, 1.

¹²⁹ M. E. Prabhakar, 'The Search for a Dalit Theology,' 211. Quoted in Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 1.

Situated within Dalit theology's praxiological framework, its practical dimensions would be understood to be the work of Dalit liberation towards identity affirmation (human dignity, identity, equality) and liberative social vision (justice, democracy, human flourishing) through the formation of liberative partnerships (Dalits themselves, the Church, non-Dalits). That these objectives have not been achieved and that liberative partnerships have not always been forged well is the foundation for the second-generation's critical reflection on Dalit theology: how and why has liberation seemingly stalled? This is the question of practical efficacy and praxis.

Roberto Goizueta presents two tendencies in Latin American Liberation theology's conception of praxis that leads to an ambiguity in its intended end/goal.¹³⁰ Identifying these tendencies helps shed light on how praxis is understood and operates in Dalit theology. He states:

The significance of this methodological emphasis on transformation as foundational for theology cannot be overestimated; it is perhaps the most important contribution of liberation theology. Yet the term liberating praxis itself contains an ambiguity: Is liberation a concomitant or a goal of praxis? If the former is true, then praxis is its own end: one becomes free in the very act or transforming history. If the latter is true, then the end of praxis is external to the praxis itself: one becomes free *after* one has transformed history.¹³¹

Like Latin American liberation theology, Dalit theology contains both notions of praxis. While it is perhaps a little too neat, one could locate identity affirmation within

¹³⁰ These two tendencies have their respective roots in Aristotle's and Marx's understanding of praxis. The former defines praxis as '*all human activity whose end is internal rather than external to itself*, i.e. all human activity which is *an end in itself*' (italics not mine). The latter understands praxis as production, transformation resulting in an external end/goal. Goizueta states, 'For Marx... what defines human action as human is precisely its productive capacity, the human ability to transform the environment. Whether what one transforming is raw wood, in order to make a house, or social structures in order to make a "just society" or one's very "self," in order to make a "better person," what defines human life and action is its usefulness in achieving the result.' Roberto Goizueta. *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic Latino Theology of Accompaniment*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

¹³¹ Roberto S. Goizueta, 'Rediscovering Praxis: The Significance of U.S. Hispanic Experience for Theological Method,' in *We are a People! Initiatives in Hispanic American Theology*, ed. Roberto S. Goizueta (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 61. Goizueta also provides an important reflection on the role of popular religiosity, which finds a nice partner in Clarke's work.

the first understanding—praxis as an end in itself (intrinsic)—and liberative social vision—an end as external to praxis (extrinsic). Here too pathos, strategically essentialized, also protects Dalit theology’s praxis from ‘subordinat[ing] the concrete present to a hoped-for-future.’¹³² A hoped-for-future cannot be envisioned apart from the present reality in all its difficulty and complicatedness. Pathos grounds Dalit theology in the now. Similarly, it helps to protect Dalit theology from an essentialized pathos that reverses this subordination rendering a hoped-for-future inconceivable, unimaginable, or unenvisionable. A proper understanding of praxis also has implications for liberative partnerships as an extrinsic understanding of praxis can threaten to reduce liberative partners into instruments of liberation—including one’s self as an agent.¹³³

In light of this of brief excursus on praxis, it may be helpful to return to Nirmal’s statement on the *imago Dei* one last time:

The Dalit consciousness should realize that the ultimate goal of its liberation movement cannot be the ‘land flowing with milk and honey.’ For a Christian Dalit theology i[t] cannot be simply the gaining of rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or conversely, our full divinity, the ideal of the [*i*]mago Dei of God in us. To use another biblical metaphor, our goal is the ‘glorious liberty of the children of God.’¹³⁴

Nirmal shows well here the two tendencies in praxis. Extrinsic praxis is seen in Dalit liberation understood as the transformation of society: the attainment of rights,

¹³² Ibid., 60.

¹³³ Ibid., 55-6. Goizueta states, ‘Whatever our ends, the instruments we employ (in this case, human praxis and, hence, human beings) always remains ambiguous because all instruments, in so far as the utilize the external environment in order to achieve those ends, necessarily involve manipulation and control—that is, coercion. To ignore this ambiguity is to undermine precisely those ends we seek...Moreover, even when the person is perceived as his or her own agent of liberation, praxis becomes the means whereby the concrete, historical person in the present recreates himself or herself (that is, “works upon” himself or herself as if upon an object), thereby achieving self-esteem, self-worth, and liberation. Concrete persons then derive their value from their ability to turn themselves into instruments of their own liberation, or to make present (historical praxis) an instrument for creating the future; this implies a process of self-objectification.’

¹³⁴ Nirmal, ‘Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,’ 63.

reservations, and privileges. Intrinsic praxis as an end in itself is highlighted in the realization of Dalit humanness and creation in the *imago Dei*.¹³⁵ Excepting the Dalit community as agents of liberation, what is absent in Nirmal's reflection are other possible liberative partners and the role they might play in Dalit Liberation. A developed understanding of liberative service may help to fill out the praxiological framework and reestablish the connection between Dalit theological articulation and its 'praxis-potential.'

Regarding the first objective of Dalit theology, identity affirmation, Dalit liberative service offers a praxis-oriented way of knowing and realizing ever deeper the liberative potential and significance of the *imago Dei*. Moreover, the *imago Dei* serves to complement the Dalitness of Dalit identity as both pathos and protest. Dalit liberative service acknowledges first that this is a service that is inaugurated by Dalit persons. This means not only that the particularity of Dalit pathos informs liberative service, granting a more dynamic understanding of pathos, but also the recognition born from pathos-experience that Dalits will necessarily be the leaven of their liberation. It entails witnessing to that pathos, making it manifest and unmaskable. It does so not to coerce or to elicit sympathy, but to present the dehumanizing conditions of oppression and exploitation that Dalits suffer and to call attention to the institutions and structures that perpetuate their misery. As the *imago Dei* points to the *regnum Dei*, which it seeks to represent in ever better ways, pathos calls attention to those forces that stand in opposition to the Kingdom. As Jon Sobrino states, 'the poor make concrete the inherent

¹³⁵ To keep the language a bit less jumbled I will refer to 'praxis an end in itself' as intrinsic praxis and 'praxis as an end external to itself' as extrinsic praxis.

opposite of hope: the current situation of oppression, the anti-Reign.¹³⁶ This is one aspect of liberative service: the denunciation of the anti-Reign in light Dalit pathos, protest, and hope.

The second aspect of liberative service and identity affirmation is the realization of the *imago Dei*. To state that one is created in the image of God and to know that one is created in God's image are two distinct things. However to know this, one must first state this even if it is stated only, necessarily, propositionally.¹³⁷ It is not a 'fake it to you make it' mode of being as there is essentially nothing to fake—one is created in the image of God whether one knows it or not. The performance of liberative service, Kingdom building service, slowly and dialectically allows for this truth to be known. This growing understanding of identity is an anthropological extension of Sobrino's statement on praxis and the Reign of God. He states, 'practice, then is not only an ethical demand, but also a hermeneutical principle of comprehension. Before doing something in behalf of the Reign of God, less is known about the Reign than after doing something for it.'¹³⁸ As created representatives of God's rule, action performed in its service allows for a greater knowing of what constitutes representation. The realization of one's true humanity occurs through many grace-filled and fueled (identity and Kingdom) acts as the latent potential of the *imago Dei* becomes actualized through service. The already/ not yet of the eschatological hope possesses an anthropological corollary.

¹³⁶ Jon Sobrino, 'The Central Position of the Reign of God in Liberation Theology,' in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 377.

¹³⁷ This may provide some epistemological insight into Dalit theology's articulation of the Dalitness of Christ and the Dalitness of God. Dalitness is something that Dalits know experientially and so not propositionally. In encountering revelation—Scripture—Dalits read through the lens of pathos and are able identify the way in which God and Christ demonstrate Dalitness. It may be a 'significant hermeneutical purchase,' but it is the one Dalit's can afford.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 378.

Regarding liberative social vision, Rajkumar has shown that Dalit theology's primary locus for praxis has been the Church and the primary model of praxis has been Jesus' solidarity with the poor and oppressed.¹³⁹ The question for him and other second-generation theologians is where are Dalits in this framework. Although they constitute the majority of Indian Church, the Church is primarily presented to be non-Dalit. Rajkumar rightfully fears that Dalits have been reduced to the objects of praxis—those to be acted upon, those to be liberated, those to be transformed. He and others see this manifested in Dalit theology's two prominent Biblical paradigms: A God who liberates with an out-stretched arm (victorization) and a God that suffers in lowly service (valorization). Dalit agency is precluded by the assurance of an extra-Dalit rescue and/or by the acceptance viz. emulation in solidarity.

Liberative service affirms Dalit agency, by articulating a liberative social vision that speaks to the needs of the Dalit community and recognizes that the impact of casteist ideology is not limited to the Dalit community alone. Here it is helpful to emphasize the goal of praxis that is extrinsic to praxis itself. This move ought not obviate an intrinsic mode of praxis, but may well support it by providing attestation to the work of God and human hands—signposts marking the advancement of the Kingdom. Rajkumar states:

The setting of concrete and liberative agendas is important for a Dalit theology of liberation. Otherwise it can succumb to the sin of sloth...Not setting liberative agendas can act as corrosives for Dalit commitment to liberation as it creates the illusion that there is nothing to work towards.¹⁴⁰

Goals and agendas matter, as they give the shape and contour of Dalit liberative service. These may include the more traditional programs: rooting out caste in Church

¹³⁹ Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 58.

¹⁴⁰ Rajkumar, 'The Diversity and Dialectics of Dissent and Implications for a Dalit Theology of Liberation,' 69.

and society, attaining rights and reservations, working to end violence against Dalit communities, enforcement of protective laws and regulations. They can include also agendas in the pursuit of justice and liberation that are not immediately connected to Dalit issues: the protection of women, the protection of Tribals, the curtailing of political corruption and economic malfeasance. Finally, they include forming new and unexpected partnerships for the work of liberative service. A robust liberative vision helps to advance the Dalit liberation movement forward as new horizons for service become apparent.

The final component of Dalit theology's praxiological framework builds upon this liberative social vision, and so remains as opened or closed as the liberative imagination may be. Dalit theologians are beginning to recognize some of the built in limitations posed by a fixed Dalit identity and a strict methodological exclusivism. Alongside this is the practical understanding that Dalit liberation, while necessarily emerging from within the Dalit community, will require extra-Dalit liberative partnerships.¹⁴¹ Here liberative service may be understood as the ability to translate Dalit theology's understanding of liberative praxis into many different theological and ideological contexts in order to create an 'ethical imperative' that will engender a response.¹⁴² It has demonstrated success already amongst non-Dalit Christian abroad as seen in the WCC's issuance of the Bangkok Declaration (2009). What remains to be seen is whether the non-Dalits and non-Christians in the Indian context will be able to respond so readily. Here interreligious dialogue—dialogues of life, action, discourse and practice—may help to find the appropriate concepts and grammar for making Dalit liberation intelligible.

¹⁴¹ Politically, this has been the case for many Dalit political parties for some time. Given India's parliamentary political system coalitions are required to build voting blocks. What remains unclear is whether a two-party or multi-party political system results in stranger political-bedfellows.

¹⁴² Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 68.

Such interreligious engagement may also provide an avenue for comparative theological reflection with India's many religious traditions. The need to be able to articulate one's own practice and vision into the grammar of a different faith necessitates a deep encounter with that tradition if the project is to be fruitful. In this way liberative partnerships may be liberative in both directions. Dalit theology could be served well by exploring and reflecting upon the traditions that are practiced and lived around the corner. Within all these religions, Hinduism included, it may find partners—persons, traditions, and practices—that can continue to inspire and help actualize Dalit theology's liberative potential as it moves forward well into the Twenty-first century.

Dalit Liberative Service in Light of Sevā

Reflecting upon Dalit liberative service in light of Swami Vivekananda's understanding of sevā draws attention to the relationship between epistemology and praxis within Dalit theology. As noted, the experience of pathos has provided Dalit theology with its primary epistemological foundation. As a structured and particular way of knowing, pathos epistemology informs Dalit theology's encounter with revelation and helps to articulate its critique of Indian society and the Indian Church in light of revelation.¹⁴³ As a result the theological content of Dalit theology is imbued with pathos—exemplified in the Suffering Servant paradigm. While not wanting to displace pathos epistemology, it is helpful to ask if there are also other Dalit ways of knowing? This question is especially

¹⁴³ In this way, Dalit theology is not dissimilar to Latin American liberation theology. To paraphrase Clodovis Boff, pathos provides its 'specific sensitivity' that serves as a point of departure in its encounter with the 'deposit of faith' or revealed truth. Clodovis Boff, 'Epistemology and Method of the Theology of Liberation,' 65. He states, 'the thrust of liberation theology is toward the development of the entire deposit of faith from a point of departure in this theology's own specific sensitivity—the sensitivity that emerges from the experience of God in the poor.'

important if pathos is an experience that Dalit theology seeks to overcome. Does a pathos-centric epistemology curtail Dalit theology's liberative potential? If, as Rajkumar and Clarke affirm, aspects of Dalit theology's content appear to be limiting liberatively, a critical assessment should extend to how that content is formed and known.

Sevā provides an alternative epistemological approach that is grounded in experience and revelation—particularly the *mahāvākyas*, which for Vivekananda are rooted in their authors' experience of non-difference—but in which knowledge is arrived at by practice. Through the performance of sevā the experience of non-difference arises gradually and sequentially, and in this experience one comes to know the liberating truth of the *mahāvākyas* and likewise one's own true identity. Practice rather than exegesis makes truth known. Furthermore, it also possesses social ramifications. As difference, understood metaphysically, becomes physically concretized and reified in the world through social practices like privilege and prejudice, sevā challenges their social and metaphysical foundations. By offering itself as counter-practice, sevā points not only to an authentic way of knowing, but an authentic way of being in the world (non-difference) and an authentic way of acting (non-differently). Can liberative service provide a similar practice-based way of knowing or knowing better?¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Within the field of practical theology, theologians like Zoë Bennet and Robert Mager are exploring praxis' epistemological import. Bennett ask generally, 'Can we know through praxis? And if so, what can we know?', and Mager particularly, 'Do we learn to know God from what we do?' Both aim to establish praxis as a proper *locus theologicus*. As Mager states, a *locus theologicus* 'in the full sense of the phrase, that is, as a God revealing process.' Both Bennet and Mager are looking to ground knowing in acting, in which praxis generates new theological knowledge. Bennet remains more probing in her essay, exploring the possibility; Mager is more assured its ability. I am here limiting 'knowing' to knowing rightly and knowing better rather than knowing newly.

Zoë Bennet, "'Action is the Life of All': The Praxis-based Epistemology of Liberation Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology 2nd edition*, ed. by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 53 Robert Mager, 'Do We Learn to Know God from what We Do?: A Plea for a Relational Concept of Action,' in *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism: International Academy of Practical Theology, Manchester 2003*, ed. by Elaine Graham and Anna Rowlands (New Brunswick, NJ: Transactions Publishers, 2005), 191.

Earlier I have argued for the need to complement the particularity of Dalit identity with an understanding of the *imago Dei*. Here the practice of liberative service aims to complement pathos epistemology. The starting point is the statement that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God, and that this image and likeness is understood to be representational—that humanity has been created in this image to represent God on earth.¹⁴⁵ For Dalit theology, this is a statement about identity and reality that although held in faith is challenged by experience and by society. The oppression and exploitation suffered by Dalits negates the dignity and humanity affirmed in this identity.

As Nirmal states the ultimate goal of Dalit consciousness is to realize the fullness of the *imago Dei* within. Identity affirmation, one of two primary objectives in Dalit theology, occurs through realization—to make aware, but also to make real. Liberative service offers a way to this realization through its actualization in the act/s of representing God. In the act of representing, rightly representing, this identity is gradually fleshed and so realized. However, to represent rightly one needs to know not only that he or she is a representative, but also needs to know how to best represent. Running parallel to Salvation History is Representation History, which begins at Creation, unfolds through the Law and the Prophets, is perfectly revealed in Jesus Christ, and continues today through the work of the Spirit.

Just as the *imago Dei* complements Dalit identity, this act of representing allows for Dalit theology's second primary objective, liberative social vision, to be better formed. The context, in this case the Indian context, will inform necessarily the particularities of this social vision, but these particularities will be informed by the

¹⁴⁵ Genesis 1: 26-28 is serving as our Christian *mahāvākya*.

word/Word of God. Broadly conceived a liberative social vision points towards a hoped for and worked for social reality marked by human flourishing, justice, peace, and love—qualities of kingdom of God. Particularly conceived, it entails a society free from caste oppression and stigmatization—violence directed against Dalit communities, forced and dehumanizing labor, the practice of untouchability—economic exploitation—landlordism, free-market fundamentalism, and unlivable wages—and religious persecution. Positively conceived, it will be a society that allows for educational opportunities, fair political representation, and equal protection under the law. As the context shifts, say from society to the Church or from the village to the city, other dimensions of this liberative social vision become more finely articulated. Liberative service then works towards the realization of Dalit theology's liberative social vision by presenting and representing it.

Finally, to complete Dalit theology's praxiological framework, identity affirmation and liberative social vision are realized both through and in liberative partnerships. The relationship between liberative partnerships and liberative social vision is perhaps more obvious than the relationship between partners and identity. Many of its transformative goals require the participation and support from non-Dalit communities, and their ultimate achievement in fact presupposes the presence of such partners. These partnerships are liberative in that they lead to liberation, but their creation is liberative as well. Their formation is dependent upon overcoming, or more precisely working to overcome, the various ideologies that prevent their possibility in the first place. That identity affirmation is achieved through and in liberative partnerships does not mean to

suggest that Dalits can affirm their identity only if non-Dalits affirm it as well. Instead it means that identity is realized by being in relationship.

Traditionally in Dalit theology Dalit identity has been constructed and affirmed through oppositional relationships—negatively in pathos experience, positively in protest. However, recalling Middleton’s second understanding of image and likeness, that in representing God humans are like ‘divine cult statues,’ humans are the physical beings that most image God. As Walter Brueggemann states, ‘There is only way God is imaged in the world, only one: humanness.’¹⁴⁶ More substantive articulations of the *imago Dei*, which emphasize freedom, the soul, or reason as how we image God, can lose sight of the dynamic interrelationality inherent to the Divine in the Trinity and manifest in God’s relationship with the world and with humanity. We come to know about God through God’s encounter with us; likewise we know ourselves better and more fully in our encountering others. This is all the more true when those liberative partnerships are formed with persons whose understanding of the divine and the human differ from our own. By drawing attention to the differences, we can see in what ways our finitude limits are own conceptualization of these categories and in what ways our understanding can be expanded by those of other persons.

Perhaps *sevā*’s reworking of devotional service in which service is offered to ‘the living gods, the poor and downtrodden’ rather than a *murti* appears to be a practice incommensurable with Christianity. And perhaps we should not or cannot say that Christians are to worship humans in this particular way. Acknowledging this, liberative service, in seeking to affirm identity and to realize its liberative social vision, does so

¹⁴⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 32. Quoted in Middleton, *The Liberating Image?*, 207. (monograph).

only by affirming this identity in others and charging them as representatives of God to represent rightly. While maintaining that these are the objectives of Dalit theology and that they work towards eliciting tangible effects in the form of social transformation, their realization cannot be limited solely to their achievement (liberative service understood extrinsically). Rather, their liberative potential is actualized and realized in the very performance of service (intrinsically). In this way, it is no longer to state an identity or to propose a social vision, but to know them and to continue to know them better.

Conclusion

This chapter began with the present-generation of Dalit theologian's recognition that for Dalit theology to remain relevant and so liberative in the 21st c., it must continue to develop in order to respond to India's changing social and theological landscape. Accompanying this recognition was a critical assessment of what Rajkumar calls Dalit theology's 'practical efficacy'—its ability to affect Dalit liberation—to which he and other second-generation theologians have found wanting. One possible area for this development to occur is in the realm of liberative partnerships with persons and communities that are non-Dalit and/or non-Christian. Even its earliest stages there were advocates, albeit a small contingent, like K. Wilson and K. C. Abraham who called for interreligious engagement, and Rajkumar himself tentatively probes this possibility at the conclusion of his work *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*.

That such interreligious engagements have not occurred with great frequency is the result of two main factors both of which relate to Dalit theology's emphasis on identity. The first is born from its methodological exclusivism, which strategically sought

to protect Dalit theology from cooption or silencing from dominant/dominating theologies by limiting Dalit theology to Dalits only. The second arises from an essentialized understanding of Dalitness which produces and necessitates an essentialized understanding of Brahminism—conceived as hierarchical, supportive of caste ideology and purity/pollution, and assimilating. This essentialized Brahminism, along with Dalit theology's criticism of traditional Indian Christian theology, has limited Dalit theology's openness to engage Hinduism. The first half of this chapter examined these limiting factors' foundations, and worked from within Dalit theology's self-understanding to show the possibility for interreligious reflection in general and with Hinduism in particular. Similar to Rajkumar's recognition that Dalit theology lacked an impetus to engage non-Dalit traditions and so risked isolating itself to the margins, there is also the phenomenon in which 'identity' theologies like Dalit theology, in so far as they are successful can then be relegated to that group by the majority, which can see itself not involved in that in 'their' theology. Employing a strategic essentialism can help to avoid both forms of marginalization as can the active pursuit of liberative partnerships.

The second half of this chapter offered one example of an interreligious encounter through a comparative theological reflection upon Swami Vivekananda's understanding of *sevā*. Its purpose was two-fold. First, it sought to construct a notion of Dalit liberative service that could help address the problem of Dalit theology's practical efficacy in light of its praxiological framework—the relationship between its objectives (the what) and approaches (the how). Here Dalit theology's objectives—identity affirmation and liberative social vision—were not replaced, but rather rethought in light of Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta and his own reworking of *sevā*. While liberative service

provided the frame, this reflection entailed a recovery of the *imago Dei* and its import—how it informs the identity to be affirmed and the liberative social vision to be understood. Building upon J. Richard Middleton’s biblically grounded understanding of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ as representative, a reworked understanding of liberative service offered practice for both to be realized, even if gradually.

To help advance towards this realization, the particular approach focused upon was liberative partnerships, and how these might be further pursued and formed beyond either other Dalit communities or the Church. Second, it sought to commend through example comparative theological reflection as a kind of liberative partnership. Here, the articulation of Dalit liberative service through an engagement with Vivekananda aimed to model such partnership as well demonstrate the process and its potential fruits. In this way the second half was both a constructive and apologetic undertaking. I believe that Vivekananda could provide Dalit theology with an authentically liberative partnership, and so in this chapter, as throughout this dissertation, I have worked to present one particular concept in order to show how that partnership might be understood theologically. Such partnerships need not be limited to the theological, and could as easily, or perhaps more easily, be formed around social, economical, or political questions. However, as a theology Dalit theology may find that even those questions, since they are not entirely located in the secular realm lead to comparative theological questions. Here, the idea of liberative vision helps to remind us that underpinning these seemingly non-religious areas for engagement are theological and philosophical beliefs that shape their understanding and articulation.

Conclusion

The necessity for a new understanding of Dalit liberative service originates in the critical, but constructive assessment of the current state of Dalit theology offered by its present generation of theologians. The persistence of caste oppression and economic exploitation that Dalits suffer both within the Church and in society have led Sathianathan Clarke, Peniel Rajkumar, and other second-generation Dalit theologians to question Dalit theology's practical efficacy and liberative potential.¹ That is, Dalit theology as it is presently articulated has shown itself to be effectively insufficient in catalyzing or actualizing Dalit liberation. Rajkumar understands Dalit theology's practical inefficacy to result from a breakdown in its praxiological framework. The gulf between this framework and Dalit theology's content (the theology it produces) has curtailed its liberative potential. While Dalit theology may offer some Good News to the Dalit community, such as the Dalitness of God and Jesus, this news lacks the liberative potency necessary to affect liberation. Moreover, as this new generation suggests, Dalit theology through its preferred paradigms like the Suffering Servant may in fact be contributing to the problem rather than to the solution. Liberative service looks to bridge this gap and to restore and actualize this potential. This new understanding of service that addresses the concerns of Clarke and others is my constructive contribution to Dalit theology.

To develop this understanding of liberative service, I bring Swami Vivekananda and his understanding of Practical Vedanta and *sevā* into a comparative theological reflection with Dalit theology. This move relates to the second function of my

¹ Clarke, Manchala, and Peacock, 'Introduction,' 11. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Libeartion*, 1.

dissertation, which I understand to be apologetic. Rather than merely commending comparative theology as an important way for thinking about liberative partnerships and their potential, I demonstrate its possibilities through my own comparative reflection. Although the reflection begins with a recognized problem within Dalit theology, Vivekananda and *sevā* are not offered as a corrective. I do not intend to simply to superimpose *sevā* upon liberative service. Instead, Vivekananda provides a theological partner with whom to think about service's possible dimensions and implications for Dalit theology. By understanding how *sevā* functions theologically and practically in Vivekananda's thinking, we gain better insight into how service might function in Dalit theology.

For Dalit theology this serves to highlight the choices that the first generation of Dalit theologians made in its construction. While recognizing their significant contributions in creating a theology that addressed a major lacuna in Indian Christian theology, it also draws attention to the implications and limitations that these considerations possess. Amongst these, two are especially contributive to limiting Dalit theology's practical efficacy. First is an essentialized understanding of 'Dalitness' that has emphasized pathos over protest and which necessitates the oppositional and essentialized category 'Brahmanism' in order to articulate Dalit theology's counter-theology. The second is a strict demand for methodological exclusivism. When coupled together, the formation of liberative partnerships (Dalit theology's approach) is difficult in general and with Hindus in particular nearly impossible.

In order to make Vedānta more accessible, Vivekananda presents a synthetic framework for Vedānta that would allow individuals to progress from what he considered

the simpler and more common experiences of dualism towards the higher experience of non-difference. Addressing the perceived lack of a Hindu ethics, Vivekananda argues that not only does Hinduism possess an ethical system, but Vedanta provides the foundation for all ethics rooted in the ultimate reality of non-difference. In both instances, Vivekananda engages in a re-reading of Advaita that aims to address his context and purposes. Upon his return to India from the United States, where he developed much of the theory that supports Practical Vedanta, Vivekananda moved from the theory of Practical Vedanta to its practice by challenging his fellow Indians to live up to the ethical demands of Vedānta. Here he focuses his critique on prejudice and privilege especially as it manifested in the relationship between high-caste and low-caste, outcaste persons and as it contributed to perpetuating material and spiritual impoverishment.

Vivekananda's development of *sevā* aims to provide a practice that would be rooted in his practical and synthetic understanding of Vedānta and that could lead to the advaitic experience of non-difference. Here he reworks *sevā* understood as a religious devotional service offered to the deity or community of devotees—particularly as it was practiced within various Vaiṣṇava communities—and presents it as service offered to the poor. While the practice's origins reside within traditional *bhakti* devotionism, the impetus for service rather than compassion—which within this devotional setting was to be offered to those outside the community—arises from Vivekananda's understanding of Sri Ramakrishna's teaching on the matter. This sense of commission alongside Vivekananda's encounter with famine and poverty throughout India during his time spent as a wandering ascetic, inspired him to establish organized programs of social and spiritual service.

As such, Sevā possesses both a social and a spiritual dimension that are interwoven. Socially, it called for a reallocation of resources from traditional devotional practices towards organized, social service programs. Vivekananda disapproved of what he saw as the ceremonial extravagances of devotion, especially as he saw it practiced within Indian temple complexes. Sevā offers an alternative object for charity and devotion—the poor. Spiritually, it helped the practitioner move gradually towards the realization of non-difference by first recognizing the inherent non-difference between the poor and God. This steady advancement towards advaitic realization is rooted in his synthetic understanding of Vedānta. Dualism, devotion to God as different, gives way to non-difference as seva is performed in conjunction with the teachings of Vedānta. A key insight Vivekananda offers is the recognition of the interrelationship between spiritual ignorance and pernicious social practices like prejudice and privilege. Both prejudice and privilege are founded upon and maintain difference, and do so often with an essentialized understanding of caste identity. Vivekananda challenges these, as well as caste understood as fixed and oppressive, by appealing to the essential non-difference between all persons.

Dalit liberative service addresses the acknowledged shortcomings that contribute to Dalit theology's practical inefficacy—an essentialized Dalitness, Brahmanism and strict methodological exclusivism—through a reflection upon its praxiological framework in light of Practical Vedānta and sevā. This undertaking necessarily begins by rethinking service's place within Dalit theology, a concept that second-generation Dalit theologians have found to be problematic. Although the first generation maintained service's servile and occupational orientation, they valorized the concept by connecting servanthood with

God's innate nature and Jesus' ministry. God and Jesus demonstrate their Dalitness through the services they perform and their embrace of its pathos dimension. The Suffering Servant is the paradigmatic theological image for this understanding of service and Dalitness.

The second generation has problematized this conception. They see it as limiting Dalit agency—Dalits are objects of charity rather than subjects of their own liberation. They also view it as curtailing Dalit theology's liberative potential—by making pathos essential to Dalitness and to God it becomes difficult to overcome. This reworking of service affirms the important role it has played in Dalit theology and recognizes it as something that should not be dismissed so quickly. However, in light of the second generation's critique, liberative service restates the importance of Dalit agency. Although Dalit liberation requires liberative partnerships to succeed, the impetus for their formation and the catalyst for their actualization necessarily emerge from within the Dalit community. Service then is understood as the liberative work that allows for these partnerships to arise. Furthermore, it is a practice that results in identity affirmation and a social vision—the two objects within the praxiological framework. Vivekananda's *sevā* provides a model for reworking 'service' that highlights the theological, social, and liberative dimensions of this practice for Dalit theology.

Given its foundation in Practical Vedanta, *sevā* is a practice, a *sādhana*, that culminates in the individual's realization of non-difference with Brahman and the world. It affirms the essential identity of who one is, has been, and will always be. To not know one's true nature has negative consequences for the individual, which in turn affects society as the experiences of difference becomes reified in social institutions. As such,

sevā has implications for the both the individual and the individual's relationship with the world. The work towards realizing non-difference alters the way one relates to oneself and the way one relates to others. Here, the poor are served as God—an initial dualism in practice that is underpinned by non-difference in theory. The practice of seeing God as being non-different with the poor alongside the teachings on non-difference in Practical Vedanta give rise to experiences of non-difference with the poor and non-difference with Brahman. Vivekananda takes seriously the impact that religion correctly and incorrectly understood can have on interpersonal relationships and so society. Sevā offers a practice that is able to address both spiritual and material poverty and its effects.

In light of how sevā functions within Practical Vedanta, I offer and construct an understanding of Dalit liberative service that can function analogously. Dalit theology is also concerned with its theological reflections' spiritual and social dimensions and understands them to be interconnected as well. The dehumanizing experiences associated with Dalit pathos wound the soul and psyche, and so Dalit theology understands total liberation to include liberation at the individual, social, and spiritual levels.² In presenting the *imago Dei* as the identity to be realized through liberative service, I do not intend to displace Dalit identity as it has been traditionally understood—Dalitness as primarily pathos and secondarily protest.³ Rather I seek to expand its potential significance through an identity that has import for Dalits and non-Dalits alike.⁴ The *imago Dei* offers a common anthropological ground that calls all persons to be fully and truly human.

² Azariah, *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, xix.

³ I do however wish to see protest gain a more equal footing with pathos.

⁴ As we have seen, first generation Dalit theologian A. P. Nirmal presents the realization of the *imago Dei* to be a primary goal in Dalit theology.

My conception of the *imago Dei* builds upon J. Middleton's biblically grounded understanding of how humanity is created in the image and likeness of God. Middleton presents a representative model that is rooted in Genesis' Ancient Near East context. Against an understanding that only the emperor or pharaoh performs this representational function, Genesis reveals that all humans are created to represent God and God's rule on earth. There is a great deal of dignity within this view of the *imago Dei*, and there is also an ethical charge to represent God authentically. Dalit liberative service works to realize this image and likeness through the practice of imaging rightly and calling others to do the same. The *imago Dei* is an identity bestowed upon humanity from the beginning, and through service in light of the God's Word/word and God's grace this image becomes perfected.

A representative understanding of the *imago Dei* further establishes the connection between identity affirmation and liberative social vision. The process of realizing this identity impacts the social vision, and actualizing this social vision shapes this identity. We know ourselves as representatives through the act of representing—serving God's kingdom. Likewise we know ourselves more authentically through more authentic forms of representation, which is never simply individual but always in relationship with God, the world, and one another. The influence of *sevā* upon this relationship between identity affirmation and liberative social vision is seen in the dialectic between representing and being representative. The depths of humanity's full humanness, its ultimate potential, is realized gradually through liberative service (representing God and serving God's kingdom). A liberative social vision is a vision that is kingdom oriented. Revelation, God's word and God's Word, Christ, provide the guide

for forming right relationships with God and with one another. Sevā shapes liberative service by showing how identity and social vision can lead to realization or humanization. However, sevā and service are not and cannot be conflated.

Within Dalit theology's praxis, the formation of liberative partnerships can be seen also as the formation of representative partnerships—that represent God in the *imago Dei* and recognize this representation in others. They are liberative in the sense that they contribute to Dalit liberation, but they are liberative also as they presuppose an initial moment of liberation from the ideologies that prevent creation of partnerships in the first place. Liberative partnerships with whom Wilson identifies as the other humanizing forces in India provide a solid-base when they are pursued. However, for new and future partnerships, liberative service will need to help actualize the liberative, humanizing potential present in hoped for partners. Within the church, at the intra-religious level, this can be accomplished through a Christian grammar. Outside of the church, at the interreligious level, alternative, liberative grammars need to be identified. Interreligious partnerships help to accomplish this as Dalit theology represents its social vision and responds to as well as reflects upon other religious and even non-religious social visions.

Through a comparative theological reflection with Swami Vivekananda, that is, through reading Dalit theology through the 'lens' of Vivekananda, I have endeavored to show one kind of liberative partnership. I do not think this engagement nor the construction of liberative service simply superimposes sevā upon service. Instead, by understanding how sevā functions for Vivekananda, I have explored how service might operate in Dalit theology in an authentically Dalit way. While this entailed a critical

evaluation of Dalit theology's current state, the end result of this reflection remains thoroughly Dalit and Christian. Inherent to the practices of comparative theology is a deep respect and appreciation for one's own tradition as well as the tradition with which one engages comparatively. Vivekananda, Practical Vedanta, and sevā are not tools employed for correction. They are a person, a tradition, and a practice and as such cannot be reduced as a means to an end not matter how noble that end might be.

Proposed as a liberative partner, Vivekananda is able to provide insights into Dalit theology through comparison and contrast. However, it is only in striving to understand how his understanding of Practical Vedanta and sevā can be understood to work towards liberation as he conceives it that the comparative reflection can bear any liberative fruit. Wilson, K. C. Abraham, and Rajkumar have called for such explorations, but Dalit theology has remained reluctant to do so. In this way liberative service may be able to liberate also Dalit theology from its hesitancy to seek out such partners. The work towards an India and a world without caste oppression begins with the gradual, but systematic spiritual, psychological, and physical unshackling from the effects of caste ideologies. It does so by countering these ideologies in the ways they are suffered and embraced by Dalits and non-Dalits alike. Liberative service contributes to a dynamic praxis that originates in the Dalit communities and seeks to find and make, freed and freeing liberative partners.

The Kingdom of Heaven Within Us: Swami Vivekananda, Dalit Theology, and I

To conclude this conclusion as well as this dissertation, I would like to offer one final, brief comparative reflection on a passage from Swami Vivekananda. In bringing together Dalit theology and Swami Vivekananda, I have tried to serve like a bridge rather than perform like a puppeteer. I do not see my place above the engagement, but instead find myself within it. These two traditions have occupied a good deal of my intellectual and spiritual attention for a great deal of time. Individually, each has impacted me—my person, my understanding, and my theology. Together they have been transformative to say the least, but I will try to say a bit more.

During his first tour of the United States, Swami Vivekananda gave a lecture titled ‘Soul, God, and Religion.’⁵ In it he described his evolutionary theory of religion that saw traditions across the world moving from dualism to non-dualism. Upon arriving at Christianity, he states:

In the New Testament it is taught, ‘Our Father who art in heaven’—God living in the heavens separated from men. We are living on earth and He is living in heaven. Further on we find that teaching that He is a God immanent in nature; He is not only God in heaven, but on earth too. He is the God in us. In the Hindu philosophy we find a stage of the same proximity of God to us. But we do not stop there. There is the non-dualistic stage, in which man realizes that the God he has been worshipping is not only the Father in heaven and on earth, but that ‘I and my Father are one.’ He realizes in his soul that he is God Himself, only a lower expression of Him. All that is real in me is He; all that is real in Him is I. The gulf between God and Man is thus bridged. Thus we find how, by knowing God, we find the kingdom of heaven within us.⁶

⁵ *CWSV* 1:317, ‘Soul, God, and Religion.’ Miss S. E. Waldo notes on this lecture or a similar lecture are recorded in *CWSV* 8:3, ‘Discourses on Jnana-Yoga.’ (c1895).

⁶ *CWSV* 1:323. Vivekananda employs the same interpretive move he uses when reconciling passages from the Upanishads that seem to contradict each other by positing a dualistic or non-dualistic. For those persons not yet ready for the truths of non-dualism, Scripture provides a dualistic interpretation as a preparation for these higher teachings.

The excursus on Jesus' teaching allowed Vivekananda to present his understanding of synthetic Vedanta to a Western Christian audience. It also granted him the opportunity to offer a polite rebuke: 'Christ's teachings are now very little understood in this country. If you will excuse me, I will say that they have never been very well understood.'⁷ It is a pointed, matter-of-fact statement and a purposefully posed challenge from one outside the tradition to one inside it to reflect critically upon one's faith.

It is good to ask what might it mean for Christians to hear, reflect, and meditate upon the words offered by Jesus, but now mediated through Vivekananda. Vivekananda presents three abbreviated verses from three different Gospels. He begins with the 'Our Father,' Jesus' instruction on how to pray, as found in Matthew 6: 9-13.⁸ For him this represents a preparatory, dualistic teaching about the relationship between God and humanity that is accessible and beneficial for the spiritually undeveloped. The second passage, 'I and my Father are one', comes from John 10: 30. It is offered to those possessing a higher state of spirituality and who are able to understand properly the true non-dualistic relationship. The third comes from Luke 17: 21, and reiterates Vivekananda's teaching on non-dualism. The full verse states, 'The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For behold, the kingdom of God is within you.'⁹

⁷ Ibid. Vivekananda routinely adopted this authoritative and corrective stance throughout his tour of the United States and Europe. Here he mimetically represents the non-native missionary on foreign soil.

⁸ Luke presents a shorter version of the prayer that lacks God's location in heaven (Luke 11: 2-4). Both Matthew and Luke have Jesus praying for the coming of the Kingdom.

⁹ The Greek preposition 'within' is ἐντός, which occurs only twice in the New Testament: Luke 17:21 and Matthew 26:23 'The Woe Statements.' This second instance is directed to the scribes and Pharisees who clean the outside of the cup, but fail to clean its inside (ἐντός). It is statement on the disconnect between outward behavior and inward disposition 'full of greed and self-indulgence.' The NRSV translates ἐντός as 'among' and the NIV as 'in your midst.' It is likely that the preposition 'within' was original to his encounter with the passage, whether orally or textually, as its change to 'among' and 'in your midst' is only a recent translators' decision.

Vivekananda has interpreted this passage for a Christian audience and through his understanding of Vedanta as both practical and synthetic. In doing so, his reflection moves beyond the immediate biblical world of the passage. It remains uncertain whether he knew the polemical context in which the statement was offered—perhaps not given his changing the pronoun from ‘you (plural)’ to ‘us.’¹⁰ Nevertheless, he offers a Vedantic reading of the passage—a non-Christian commentary on a Christian text—that reads at once strange, but not necessarily unfamiliar. Even though Vivekananda understands it to be an anthropological statement rather than a Christological one, the concluding line, ‘the gulf between God and [humanity] is thus bridged’ squares with a Christian understanding of the Incarnation.¹¹

Perhaps, however, we can reflect upon this passage’s anthropological potential. Again, while it is important to maintain the ontological distinctions between Practical Vedanta and Christianity, Vivekananda’s prompt encourages a reflection on what it means to say the kingdom of God is ‘within you,’ ‘amongst you.’ Prior to answering what is meant by the kingdom, the most immediate question pertains to how one ought to translate the preposition ἐντὸς. Both ‘within’ and ‘amongst’ possess great semantic range, and each suggests a different location and so understanding. Colin H. Roberts, the late Oxford scholar, provides a brief historical survey of how ἐντὸς has been translated and

¹⁰However, there is a nice symmetry in Vivekananda’s offering a rebuke through a passage that does the same. He has also changed ‘kingdom of God’ to ‘kingdom of heaven,’ perhaps with the intention of making the connection between ‘our Father who are in Heaven’ (dualism) and ‘kingdom of heaven is within us’ (non-dualism) more apparent.

¹¹For a point of contrast, especially methodologically see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. and his commentary on Luke. He translates the preposition as ‘among you’ and offers two senses of the statement. He notes, ‘Either “among you,” i.e. in the midst of you, in the presence of the person of Jesus himself and his ministry of preaching and healing; or “among you,” i.e. within your grasp, reach.’ Regarding the context he states, ‘In effect, Jesus would be putting his inquirers on the spot: Either they have not recognized what is in their presence or they have not allowed themselves to be accosted by his kingdom-preaching.’ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke (X-XXIV), The Anchor Bible Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1159.

sees a near absolute shift in translation away from ‘within’—‘the way familiar by usage and sanctioned by a tradition of exegesis almost unbroken until modern times’—and towards ‘among’—‘there is hardly a modern theologian...who does not translate, *The Kingdom of Heaven is among you*.’¹² Roberts provides a third way that seeks navigate between the two translations so as to avoid the objections he raises against them.¹³

Placing it within its context, in which it is a response to the question, ‘When is the Kingdom of God coming,’ Roberts states:

The answer is that it does not come at all if you strain your eyes to look for it, because it is with you, in your possession, if you want it, now. To ask whether the Kingdom is external or internal, a state of mind or a state of society, a process or a catastrophic event is (in this context) to ask the wrong question; it is no wonder, then, that both answers are wrong, or rather partial and incomplete. Both may in a sense be right. It is a present reality, but only if you wish it to be so. The misconception to be removed is that the Kingdom is something external to men, independent of their volitions and actions; it is a conditional possession.¹⁴

The kingdom is not detached from human agency; it something to be sought after, pursued, and realized. Elsewhere in Luke, the author presents the kingdom as being like a mustard seed or leaven in bread. A tiny thing, but full of great potential that when actualized grows or arises amongst and within us. However, the kingdom is not just a call to seek and to knock, but a charge to be transformed. This is the same kingdom of which Jesus says a camel has a better chance of squeezing through the eye of the needle than a

¹² Colin H. Roberts, ‘The Kingdom of Heaven (Lk. XVII.21),’ *Harvard Theological Review* 41.1 (1948): 1.

¹³ He states, ‘And yet the objections to both renderings are substantial, if not (as I think) insuperable. To survey briefly what is familiar ground, it is urged against the first that an immanentist conception of the Kingdom as a state of mind, as indwelling (whether by grace or nature) in the human soul, is alien to the teaching of Jesus throughout the Gospels, and that if a universalist interpretation is not placed upon the words, the incongruity of their being addressed to the Pharisees remains unexplained. The objection to the second view is twofold; firstly, *ἐντός* never means simply *among* either in classical Greek or in the language of the papyri and inscriptions (in spite of the insistence of commentators this meaning finds no place in the new Liddell and Scott) and secondly that it ignores the Fathers and the whole exegetical tradition.’ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

rich man has to entering it (Lk 19: 24). It is the same kingdom whose announcement entails proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor (Lk 4: 18-19), and whose proclaimers are told to take, 'nothing for [their] journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic' (Lk 9:3) and not to turn back—a de-conversion (Lk 9: 62). The kingdom is good news and hard news.

Vivekananda began his teaching on what we might call 'synthetic Christianity' with Jesus' teaching on prayer. He takes the passage to be representative of an initial and preparatory dualism that can and should become overcome. Jesus' prayer continues, 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Mt 6: 10). Perhaps a Christian understanding of non-difference can be understood not as substantive non-difference, but as volitive non-difference. Realization would then entail becoming aware of God's will, and working to bring one's own will in line with God's. This notion of non-difference fits well within the theological anthropology outlined in this project—the *imago Dei* as representative of God and the act of representing as enacting/cooperating with God's will.

A new dynamic to this comparative theological engagement is added when this reflection upon the kingdom of God being 'within' as read with Vivekananda is now also read with Dalit theology. Dalit theology, especially its rootedness in Dalit pathos, highlights the dialectical tension of an inaugurated eschatology in which the kingdom of God is both already and not yet. Dalit pathos as experienced and witnessed reveals the degree to which the 'not yet' remains painfully 'not yet.' It is a reality in which to pray for 'daily bread' is in fact a literal prayer for bread, sustenance, and life. Conversely, the

kingdom's in-breaking, its already if not yet fully manifested arrival, challenges us to see where and how, in the face of pathos, it is here. This challenge is further complicated by Jesus' words, 'The Kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!"' In his critique of the 'Deuteronomic Creed' and God's 'victor-hood' paradigm in Dalit theology, Clarke states:

In the Indian context it seems that the 'mighty acts of God,' which deliver God's chosen oppressed from the clutches of their oppressors, have either changed their aim or exhausted themselves...can it not be said there has been a winding down of the mighty acts of God.¹⁵

Clarke calls for greater Dalit agency and for Dalits to take charge of their own liberation. Waiting for observable (expected) signs, those 'mighty acts of God,' misses the true sign and the real mighty act: God made flesh who announces the kingdom arriving not from without, but from within the individual and amongst the community. How are we to be that visible sign? This now triple reading presents to the reader new insights alongside new questions that compel the reader back into the engagement. It is an ongoing process ever mining, but never exhausting the possibilities in faith.

Comparative theology, like any theological endeavor, is one of faith seeking understanding. All the components of Anselm's famous formula are operative within it. Thomas Williams further elucidates Anselm's meaning. He states, 'Faith for Anselm has more to do with our wills than with our beliefs: faith means a love for God and a drive to act as God wills...so "faith seeking understanding" means something like "an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God."¹⁶ The particular method of seeking, what Francis X. Clooney calls 'a venture into learning from one or more faith traditions,'

¹⁵ Clarke, 'Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence,' 285.

¹⁶ Anselm, *Proslogion: With the Replies of Gaunilo and Anselm*, trans. and introduction by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2001).

distinguishes comparative theology from other standard non-comparative methods of Christian theology, but as Clooney demonstrates, this venture begins with a rootedness in one's own tradition and returns to that tradition with new insights 'indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.'¹⁷ There is an intrinsic quality to comparative theology in which the venturing is an end in itself, and a good work of comparative theology is an invitation into this venture as much as, or perhaps even more than, it is a presentation on what has been understood. This does not mean that 'understanding' is unimportant, but rather acknowledges that this understanding will always be incomplete—as God is beyond total comprehension—and so the venture continues in order to understand more fully.

While acknowledging that not all comparative theology has to be liberation theology nor does all liberation theology have to be comparative, I do think that there needs to be more mutually comparative and liberative theological engagements. Each takes seriously and responds more than adequately to one of the two prominent questions that Christian theology in the 21st c. must continue to address: the question of the many religions and the question of the many poor.¹⁸ In this dissertation I have aimed to present such a comparative and liberative theology, which addresses a particular context, the Dalit and Indian context, where these two questions converge emphatically.

Over the course of its writing, it has become harder for me to see myself other than as a comparative and sympathetic Dalit theologian. However, at the same time,

¹⁷ Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, 10. Comparative theology is 'acts of faith seeking understanding, which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This leaning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.' Ibid.

¹⁸ Paul Knitter, 'Meeting of Religions: A Christian Debate,' in Gavin D'Costa, Paul Knitter, and Daniel Strange, *Only One Way?: Three Christian Responses on the Uniqueness of Christ in a Religiously Plural World* (London: SCM Press, 2011), 50.

during this particular project I have written articles and given presentations that are comparative in their method, but address my own North American context. Here, I must acknowledge a dual obligation to both contexts, without which I simply float untethered to any grounding and away from any audience; a theologian entire to myself. As one with a foot in each world, even if one is present remotely, this dual obligation entails bringing the insights from one context to bear upon another. The significance of the local and the contextual is significant, and so it should not be limited ultimately to that important, but confined space. Dalit theology provides an important reminder that the many poor are in fact many and diverse—culturally, ethnically, and religiously.

I do not think that this dual obligation necessarily entails a ‘turning back,’ I must admit nevertheless that as a sympathetic Dalit theologian, and not a ‘pathetic’ Dalit theologian, I always will have this freedom.¹⁹ Instead I see it as a ‘turning to,’ and as the dynamic continues a ‘turning around and around.’ The way that I have reconciled, and I hope not merely self-justified, this ambiguity and potential identity problem is to understand this theological reflection to be at the service of the Dalit community in particular and to the service of kingdom of God in general. In this way, I hope also that the reflection offered here can have meaning and import both within and beyond the Dalit and Indian context.

¹⁹Here I am reminded and chastened by my good friend Pangernungba’s challenge to a preeminent political theologian whose done good and important work on appreciation and liminality as solidarity. Panger informed this theologian that despite the authenticity of his solidarity, he always has the freedom to move out of the liminal space in which he had chosen to locate himself.

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